

# “Produce Patriots As Well As Scholars”: GAR Educational Reform and the Establishment of Mason City’s Memorial University

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THE NEWSPAPERS of Mason City declared Wednesday, June 26, 1901, as a “Day of Jubilee.” Businesses closed, citizens festooned public buildings with flags and bunting, and thousands of visitors from across the region descended on the small northern Iowa town. Crowds gathered to witness the cornerstone laying of the first of many planned academic buildings for the new Memorial University—a bold educational venture where the nation’s rising generation would learn the principles of good citizenship for the new American century and internalize the noble values exhibited by the men and women of the Civil War era North. Befitting the occasion, hundreds of grizzled members of the powerful but aging Grand Army of the Republic (GAR)—the largest organization of Union veterans—paraded down Mason City’s streets alongside Spanish-American War veterans and other patriotic and fraternal societies in front of at least 10,000 spectators.<sup>1</sup>

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1. For event details, see “The Day of Jubilee Is Here,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 6/26/1901; and “Beginning of a New College,” *Davenport Times*, 6/27/1901.

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The festivities then shifted to a knoll southeast of town, recently dubbed Patriot's Hill, which would serve as the site of the envisioned campus. Under a large, overflowing tent, orators gave voice to the special meaning of the day. Most prominent was Eliakim "Ell" Torrance of Minneapolis, a leading officer in the GAR. Rejecting the spirit of sectional reconciliation that had overtaken many Northern and Southern white Americans, Torrance declared that it seemed "but yesterday since we looked helplessly upon an enslaved face, with its auction block and overseers' lash; but yesterday since we heard the Constitution, purchased at so great a cost by the patriots of the Revolution, denounced as a lie; and the flag of Washington spurned and trampled upon by traitorous feet." Calling his audience a "great army of freedom," Torrance insisted, "this is certainly an hour and this the place for a new baptism of patriotism."<sup>2</sup> Next, Iowa State College president and GAR veteran William M. Beardshear spoke to how Memorial University would stand as a living, practical monument to the Union soldier. "More fitting than . . . shafts of granite," he proclaimed, "is the monument whose foundation we place today. . . . Here the spirit of the Grand Army of the Republic like that of John Brown's body will go marching on long after that lamentable day when the last old soldier . . . shall lie 'under the sod and the dew,' with his country's flag like the stars forever above him."<sup>3</sup>

This article examines the institutional history of Memorial University—a college, normal school, and preparatory academy in Mason City, Iowa. It argues that despite its short-lived existence Memorial University represented an audacious experiment linking a GAR-endorsed memory of the Civil War with Progressive Era educational reform in a period of burgeoning national power.<sup>4</sup> Further, the university's establishment points to a new

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2. Ell Torrance address delivered at cornerstone-laying ceremony of Memorial University, 6/26/1901, box 34, Ell Torrance Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN (hereafter MHS).

3. Quoted in "Memorial University Opens," *Grand Army Advocate* (Des Moines, IA), September 1902, box 13, Ell Torrance Papers, MHS.

4. My research, while heavily indebted to David W. Blight's conceptualization of Civil War memory, nonetheless contributes to the ongoing revision of his

interpretation of turn-of-the-century GAR veterans that goes beyond typical views that suggest that they were primarily invested in securing military service pensions, electing Republicans, erecting stoic monuments in town squares, and waxing nostalgically about their bygone days in the Union Army.<sup>5</sup> Instead, this article highlights just one example of how aging GAR veterans and, vitally, their auxiliary allies utilized their memory of the Civil War to direct robust social activism during the Progressive Era. In this case, they invested their emotional, organizational, and financial

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influential reconciliationist paradigm. It identifies a GAR memory of the Civil War and asserts Union veterans' own remembrances of their war experience are an overlooked but vital aspect of the nation's messy reunification process. See David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA, 2001). For scholars who have challenged aspects of Blight's thesis and advanced the notion of a Unionist memory of the war, see William A. Blair, *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865–1914* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004); John R. Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation* (Lawrence, KS, 2005); Barbara A. Gannon, *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011); Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2013); and M. Keith Harris, *Across the Bloody Chasm: The Culture of Commemoration among Civil War Veterans* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2014).

5. Interpretations of the GAR like these are best exemplified by the works of scholars such as historian Mary Dearing, political scientist Theda Skocpol, and historian Stuart McConnell. The first major scholarly treatment of the GAR, Dearing's *Veterans in Politics: The Story of the GAR* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1954), emphasized that members "became efficient cogs in the Republican machine" and evolved into a successful political lobbying group best evidenced by their ability to direct one-fifth of the federal government's revenue toward service pensions. In 1992, Skocpol similarly emphasized the GAR's lobbying significance in her top-down, policy-heavy *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA), which declared Union veterans' pensions as "America's first national system of public old-age and disability benefits." McConnell's *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992), the preeminent social history of the GAR, notes the numerical and political decline of the organization by the late 1890s and simply declared that the GAR after 1900 became "an organization for the promotion of patriotism and the commemoration of Memorial Day." My work shows that with more than 250,000 members in 1900, the GAR was still a powerful and assertive fraternal order whose members readily engaged in civic and reform activism as the nation entered the heart of the Progressive Era. For quotations, see Dearing, vii, 117; Skocpol, viii; and McConnell, xiii.

support in a civic education project that aimed to cultivate new generations of loyal citizens at a time when shifting national and international responsibilities called for an assertive brand of American patriotism.<sup>6</sup>

After victoriously emerging from the Spanish-American War, the United States was beset with challenges associated with its newfound status as a bone fide world power, an influx of immigrants harboring no connection to the Civil War, as well as expanding urbanization and industrialization. Many Americans viewed the education of the nation's youth—both native and foreign-born—as a way to bring order out of the chaos. According to one scholar of the Progressive Era, activists sought to “transform pupils into dutiful, hardworking, loyal citizens” prepared to become “full, individual participants in a democratic society.”<sup>7</sup> This civic spirit also pervaded the progressives' views of the nation's quickly multiplying institutions of higher learning. As historian Frederick Rudolph argued, progressives wanted university education to encompass the idea that “informed intelligence when applied to the problems of modern society could make democracy work more effectively.”<sup>8</sup> One new study of turn-of-the-century higher education similarly demonstrated that contemporaries viewed university attendance as the best means to mitigate the problems associated with modern life by nurturing “civic

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6. In her study of how gendered behavioral codes shaped turn-of-the-century American imperialism, Kristen L. Hoganson discussed “a nation wary of the imperial endeavors that were reshaping the globe; a nation in which leadership was passing from the venerated Civil War generation to those who had grown up in the shadow of the Civil War.” The establishment of Memorial University exemplifies this transition in leadership. GAR veterans relied on their women's and hereditary auxiliaries to create an institution in which the lessons of the Union's victory could be learned and applied by a rising generation charged with navigating America's standing in an imperial age. For quotation, see Kristen L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, CT, 1998), 1.

7. Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (New York, 2003), 110, 111.

8. Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (Athens, GA, 1962), 363.

responsibility" among students.<sup>9</sup> Principles of duty, loyalty, democracy, and civic responsibility formed the basis of educational reform during the era and also called to mind Union veterans' Civil War service. The establishment of Memorial University thus subsumed Progressive Era educational reform and the GAR's memory-driven activism at the turn of the century, such that the institution stood squarely at the confluence of both movements.

Historians have previously studied Grand Army involvement in education, emphasizing how benign old veterans taught young boys and girls how to salute the flag or sing patriotic songs. Over 50 years ago, Robert H. Wiebe identified GAR veterans as key actors in the pursuit of Progressive Era social order, asserting that their presence in public schools was part of a "hectic campaign to instill patriotism through worship of the Constitution, the flag, and America's heroes."<sup>10</sup> Another historian of U.S. patriotism argued that Grand Army veterans and, importantly, their wives entered the public schools and served "as authentic actors in the living theater of Civil War history," aiding in the instruction of good citizenship for native-born and immigrant children alike.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, scholars of the GAR and Civil War memory have underscored the renewed battle between postwar northerners and southerners over school textbooks and the lessons of the war they inculcated. Historian Stuart McConnell, for instance, detailed Grand Army textbook advocacy, illustrating how members promoted only those versions grounded in "the theme of Union" and attacked any that hedged on the crime of southern secession.<sup>12</sup> M. Keith Harris likewise asserted that veterans on both sides of the sectional divide understood the importance of

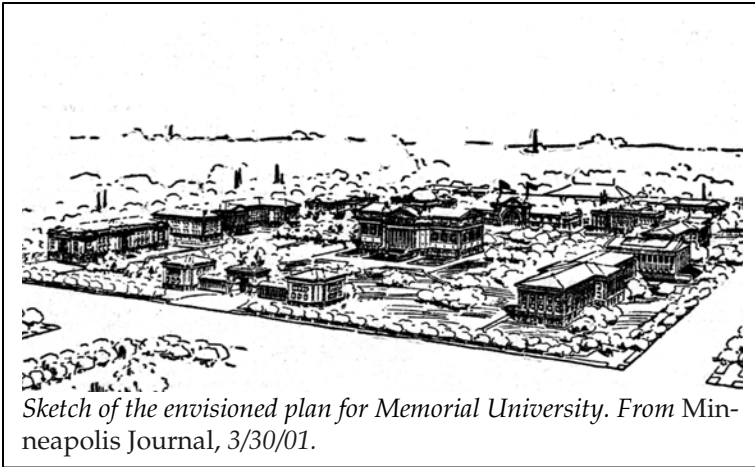
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9. Steven J. Diner, *Universities and Their Cities: Urban Higher Education in America* (Baltimore, 2017), 18–20, 35.

10. Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York, 1967), 57.

11. Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), 190. O'Leary also illustrated the GAR's paternalistic belief in welcoming immigrants and instructing them in "true" Americanism. She argued that to many GAR veterans the "acceptance of immigration restriction amounted to an implicit criticism of America's powers of conversion." O'Leary, *To Die For*, 62.

12. McConnell, *Glorious Contentment*, 224–32.



school textbooks “to illuminate both the ‘right’ and the ‘wrong’ versions of Civil War history.”<sup>13</sup> Historians, however, have not studied Union veterans’ endorsement of and activities within the nation’s fast-growing network of turn-of-the-century institutions of higher education.

The establishment of Memorial University is an example of this overlooked form of GAR activism, which was more potent, practical, and progressive than the more traditional commemorative exercises usually associated with aged Union veterans. The project was crucially supported by the GAR’s auxiliary allies in the Woman’s Relief Corps (WRC) and Sons of Veterans (SV), who provided a great deal of the organizational and fundraising labor on behalf of a generation quickly entering their twilight years. Together, all three groups shared a vision to graduate scholars from Memorial University who had mastered the Union veteran’s remembrance of the Civil War. These graduates could then apply those lessons toward progressive efforts to broaden accessibility to university education, promote service in the public sphere, and deploy civic virtue in the battle against the nation’s societal ills. All the while, the school’s founders sought to stem the tide of North-South reconciliationism by grounding the curriculum in support of GAR-approved values of citizenship,

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13. Harris, *Across the Bloody Chasm*, 8.

service, loyalty, and Americanism, all with a strikingly Unionist bent. As the *Mason City Globe-Gazette* reported at the time of the cornerstone-laying ceremony, Memorial University would stand with “a purpose greater than has yet been realized. It is a purpose which grasps the opportunity to immortalize the spirit of patriotism, elevate civic virtue, clothe sentiment with utility, and make all the future beneficiary, not only of the achievement of martial deeds but of the greater triumphs of peace.”<sup>14</sup>

### **“Build a College and You Hold a Fortress”: The Origins of a National University**

From the republic's earliest days, Americans debated the value of planting an elite institution of higher education in the nation's capital, established and supported by the federal government. Luminaries across the political spectrum articulated the merits of a so-called “national university” and its potential to instill in its students a devotion to the state and to civic service. Notably, George Washington bequeathed \$25,000 (the equivalent of over \$375,000 in 2020) toward the endowment of such an institution to train young citizens “in acquiring knowledge in the principles of politics and good government” and to help “spread systematic ideas through all the parts of this rising empire, thereby to do away [with] local attachments and State prejudices.”<sup>15</sup> Other early advocates for a national university included Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and John Quincy Adams. Nevertheless, antebellum critics consistently thwarted the efforts. They doubted a national university's constitutionality and feared the consolidation of U.S. higher education under federal control.<sup>16</sup>

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14. “The Day of Jubilee Is Here,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 6/26/1901.

15. Quoted in Jared Sparks, *The Writings of George Washington*, vol. 11 (Boston, 1838), 3.

16. For criticisms of the national university vision before the Civil War, see George Thomas, “The National University and Constitutional Limits,” chap. 2, in *The Founders and the Idea of a National University: Constituting the American Mind* (New York, 2015).

The idea again gained traction after the Civil War, when advocates argued that a national university's unifying influence might have averted the sectional crisis in which so many Americans, specifically college-aged men, had died. The string of postwar Republican veteran-presidents—Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, and James A. Garfield—supported the university concept, corresponding with their party's intention to consolidate the reunited country and strengthen the federal government.<sup>17</sup> In 1877, for instance, Hayes delivered a message to Congress arguing that it would be “to the great and lasting benefit of the entire country, that this [educational] system should be crowned with a university in all respects in keeping with the national capital and thereby realize the cherished hope of Washington.”<sup>18</sup> Further, postwar proponents of a national university tied its establishment to the era's powerful nationalistic impulses, deeming an education from the proposed institution to be a foundation for its graduates' loyal and passionate public service. One advocate asserted that the university's prospective scholars “would in time return to their thousands of homes more ardent patriots, the better qualified to serve their country, the more resolute in purpose to protect it from perils of every nature.”<sup>19</sup>

Union veterans subscribed to this rhetoric too, linking a national university education with civic-minded patriotism. Like their former army commanders who they had helped to send to the White House, GAR members imagined the establishment of the institution as the educational culmination of their efforts to preserve and restore a unified nation. The *National Tribune*, the fraternity's official organ, steadfastly supported the venture for many years, seeing in its creation the fount for a powerful state and an informed and loyal citizenry. Indicating a national

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17. On post-Civil War state formation and its obstacles, see Richard Franklin Bensel, “State Structure and Reconstruction: The Political Legacy of the Civil War,” chap. 6, in *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859–1877* (New York, 1990).

18. *Letters and Messages of Rutherford B. Hayes, President of the United States, Together with Letter of Acceptance and Inaugural Address* (Washington, D.C., 1881), 98.

19. John W. Hoyt, *Memorial in Regard to a National University* (Washington, D.C., 1892), 23.



university's ability to "place the United States at the very head, in comparison with similar institutions in other lands," the education it offered would combine "the highest learning with the purest patriotism."<sup>20</sup> At their 1898 state encampment, Massachusetts GAR officials—acting on local post resolutions in support of a national university—urged comrades to assist the various patriotic societies in pressing Congress to authorize the institution.<sup>21</sup> Citing the project as one that "appeals directly to our patriotism," the veterans advised that a national university "would be a most fitting thing for a great nation, ambitious to lead the world in civilization."<sup>22</sup> Reminiscent of antebellum opposition to the university scheme, stiff resistance to the plan reappeared after the war. Critics (including many wary white southerners) still distrusted the centralization of U.S. higher education and several influential university presidents proved hostile to competition from a federally sponsored institution.<sup>23</sup> The national university never amounted to the vision George Washington proposed a century earlier.

Grand Army veterans and their auxiliary allies, however, remained strongly supportive of an elite national institution of higher education—one that might groom civic-minded patriots from every region of the country and prepare them for service on behalf of a reunited nation. The vision of such service evoked memories of the Union soldier, torn away from the educational and professional pursuits he might have enjoyed as a young man, had the requirements of war not intervened. Proponents of a GAR-endorsed national university believed that knowledge

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20. *National Tribune* (Washington, D.C.), 10/7/1897.

21. Besides the GAR, the national university venture attracted support from a host of hereditary and patriotic societies. The GAR's women's auxiliary, the Woman's Relief Corps (WRC), was another vocal advocate for a national university. See Wallace Evan Davies, *Patriotism on Parade: The Story of Veterans' and Hereditary Organizations in America, 1783–1900* (Cambridge, MA, 1955), 245.

22. *Journal of the Thirty-Second Annual Encampment, Department of Massachusetts, Grand Army of the Republic* [. . .] (Boston, 1898), 56.

23. See Charles W. Eliot, *A National University. Report Made by Charles W. Eliot, President of Harvard University, to the National Educational Association* [. . .] (Cambridge, MA, 1874), 23.

and education provided safeguards against the ignorant and debasing social currents that had once corrupted white southerners, namely, secessionism and slavery, and subsequently, led to the death, debility, and stunted opportunities for millions of northern men (not to mention suffering and sacrifice on the part of northern women). Establishing a world-class institution would help prevent a similar recurrence for future generations. As one editorialist argued, "education form[s] a bulwark about a people amply sufficient for their protection from both domestic and foreign dangers."<sup>24</sup>

As the nation's colleges and universities became more influential after the Civil War, Americans—including Union veterans—increasingly looked to them as powerful disseminators of cherished values.<sup>25</sup> Although the ratio of students to the total number of young adults remained small (about two percent in 1900), the number of colleges and universities grew rapidly. When the war commenced, fewer than 400 institutions existed. Forty years later, the number ballooned to nearly one thousand.<sup>26</sup> As a result, more and more communities across the country came to shape and be shaped by their institutions of higher education.

Increasingly, Union veterans and their families became part of this movement, exhibiting a growing interest in transmitting their preferred values to a GAR-backed college. Here, young scholars would learn more intently about the tragedy of the 1860s, the rightness of the Union Cause, the abhorrence of the Lost Cause, and how to prevent a similar catastrophe. By emphasizing disciplines such as history, politics, civics, and ethics, instructors would teach their students the importance of service, liberty, and love of country, all of which would be guided by the memory of the Union soldiers' sacrifice. Graduates would then leave the institution,

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24. "G.A.R. Memorial College," *National Tribune*, 5/5/1892.

25. As W. Bruce Leslie confirms, post-Civil War colleges were useful progenitors of middle-class, Protestant values. "Americans," according to Leslie, "increasingly turned to colleges to perpetuate their cultural values and social position in the next generation." See W. Bruce Leslie, *Gentlemen and Scholars: College and Community in the "Age of the University," 1865–1917* (University Park, PA, 1991), 1.

26. For statistics, see Thomas D. Snyder, ed., *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait* (Washington, D.C., 1993), 63, 75, 76.

steeled to the dangers of anarchy, tyranny, and bigotry, and prepared to exercise their citizenship on behalf of order, community, and justice.<sup>27</sup> As one advocate of the proposal simply stated in the *National Tribune*, "build a college and you hold a fortress."<sup>28</sup>

It was in the heart of the country, where so many veterans and their families migrated after the war, that supporters envisioned a national testament to patriotic education and Unionist principles rising high above the prairies. In 1889, several local members of the WRC came together with designs to found a college in the community of Oberlin, Kansas. "The object," declared the all-woman board of trustees, "is to build a National Educational institution, in which every department of higher learning shall be free to the children and the children's children of those who saved our nation; to perpetuate their memory in honor and to inculcate the principles for which they offered their lives."<sup>29</sup> State GAR officials agreed. At the annual convention of the GAR's Kansas Department in 1890, the comrades gave the National GAR Memorial College's trustees their approval. Commending the "certain ladies actuated by the principles of Friendship, Charity and Loyalty," Kansas GAR officers endorsed the college and urged "favorable consideration of all persons interested in the education of the children of the soldiers and sailors of the late war."<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately for the WRC's vision, however, little more came of the project. Endorsements from other state- and national-level GAR officials never materialized and the Kansas WRC fell victim to disorganization and infighting. By 1894, with not a single cornerstone laid and no students matriculated, the GAR Memorial College endeavor had died.

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27. Equating the danger of mid-nineteenth-century Confederate secession with the threat of turn-of-the-twentieth century anarchism was common among Union veterans. See Harris, *Across the Bloody Chasm*, 58–59.

28. "G.A.R. Memorial College," *National Tribune*, 5/5/1892.

29. Subscription request letter for the National G.A.R. Memorial College, 1891, box 2, Henry A. Castle Papers, MHS.

30. *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Encampment, Grand Army of the Republic* [. . .] (Topeka, KS, 1890), 94.

### **“Scholars for the Sake of Being Citizens”: Forging a National Memorial University**

A few years later in Iowa the GAR's other significant auxiliary, the Sons of Veterans (SV), rekindled the national university idea. Leading the effort was Alexander Louis “Al” Sortor, Jr. Born in Iowa City in 1867, Sortor (whose father had served in the 20<sup>th</sup> Ohio Independent Battery) reportedly “never wearied of stories of heroism; of the camp-fire; of death in the trenches; of fierce fights where thousands fell” and became an enthusiastic member of the SV.<sup>31</sup> As a young man, Sortor settled in Mason City and as early as 1896, envisioned “a college here . . . that will be a memorial to the union [sic] soldiers of the Civil war [sic] . . . devoted to the education of their children.”<sup>32</sup> At the annual SV convention the following year in Indianapolis, Sortor suggested forming a committee of five to consider establishing a national university as a lasting tribute to the Civil War generation.<sup>33</sup> The Sons favored the idea and assigned Sortor to the committee, but their work was briefly postponed when he and other SV members enlisted to fight the Spanish in 1898. Sortor redoubled his efforts upon his return to civilian life, drumming up interest and pledges of financial support for the institution among GAR veterans and other patriotic societies. As initiative on a federally sponsored national university stalled, veterans and their allies assumed the burden of creating a national memorial university that would graft the sacrifices of the war generation to the goals of an institution centered around patriotic education and public service.

Although Sortor envisioned a memorial university in his hometown, the decision to determine its location did not go uncontested. Besides Mason City, civic leaders in Utica, New York;

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31. Quoted in Charles Sumner Nichols, “A Patriotic Ideal,” *The National Magazine: An Illustrated American Monthly* 14 (Apr.–Sep. 1901), 445.

32. Quoted in “Al Sortor, Originator of Memorial University, Dies,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 2/7/1944.

33. For more on the SV's early planning for the institution, see *Journal of Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Encampment of the Sons of Veterans, U. S. A* [. . .] (Reading, PA, 1897), 210.

Plainfield, New Jersey; Lake Minnetonka, Minnesota; and Washington, D.C., all vied to host the institution. Boosters in the nation's capital most clearly articulated a vision for the prospective institution, which mirrored what national university advocates had long hoped to establish. For instance, the Washington representatives touted easy access to the Smithsonian Institution, the Congressional Library, and other "educational privileges"—not to mention the ability for students to learn about "the practical administration of the federal government" up close. In their pitch, the Washington Board of Commissioners enticed the SV by noting the "easy access of many of the great battlefields of the War of the Rebellion." Meanwhile, the Washington Board of Trade was particularly prescient in promoting the capital as "neutral ground" that would not fall victim to regional infighting. "Should you secure a purely local habitation," the Board warned, "the college would soon become more or less closely identified with the many inhabitants of that locality and eventually with the State itself."<sup>34</sup>

To be sure, a small town in northern Iowa seemed to be an odd spot for what the SV envisioned as "the Harvard of the West."<sup>35</sup> Halfway between Des Moines and Minneapolis, and three hundred miles west of Chicago, Mason City was a comparatively outlying community with a turn-of-the-century population of roughly seven thousand. Still, the town's many promoters lauded its "intelligent, hospitable, and progressive" citizens, convenient rail access, modern amenities, and good "moral tone," which was attributed to the community's "absence of saloons" (deemed a particular benefit for a town angling to host college students).<sup>36</sup> Other backers extolled Mason City's location amidst "the loyal soldiery of the north" and professed that it would satisfy the need for "a university of the first class in the Mississippi

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34. Localism ultimately hindered Memorial University's ability to assume a national scope and, arguably, hastened its failure, which proved their warning to be farsighted. For the Washington, D.C. boosters' inducements, see *Journal of Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Encampment of the Sons of Veterans* [. . .] (Boston, 1900), 120–25.

35. Quoted in "Memorial University," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 8/19/1942.

36. Nichols, "A Patriotic Ideal," 446–47.

valley."<sup>37</sup> But whatever the town's benefits or shortcomings, it led its competitors in one important respect—financial pledges. Mason Cityans promised forty acres for the campus, as well as a gift of \$75,000 for the construction of the embryonic university's first academic building. Money ultimately pushed Mason City to the forefront of the Memorial University sweepstakes, with electors at the SV's 1900 national encampment in Syracuse, New York, selecting the town by an overwhelming vote of 143 to 10.<sup>38</sup>

Progress on Memorial University proceeded quickly, aided by the support of enthusiastic Grand Army veterans and members of the organization's auxiliaries. Mason City's own Charles H. Huntley Post No. 42 contributed twenty dollars from its modest treasury while the veterans from nearby Clear Lake's Tom Howard Post No. 101 chipped in another ten. Some wealthier Mason City members later contributed personal funds to sponsor a competitive scholarship.<sup>39</sup> The women of Iowa's WRC pulled in especially impressive fundraising numbers. Department president Georgia B. Worker declared December 3, 1901, "Memorial University Day," and urged members across the state "to prepare on that day an entertainment of a patriotic nature, the proceeds to go as Iowa's contribution to help carry out this work . . . to commemorate the lives and deeds of the loyal men and women of the Civil War."<sup>40</sup> The individual corps responded generously. By early the following year, state WRC officials reported that members had contributed over \$800 dollars to the project with corps in Cedar Rapids (\$100), Mason City (\$50), Iowa City (\$35), and Muscatine (\$35)

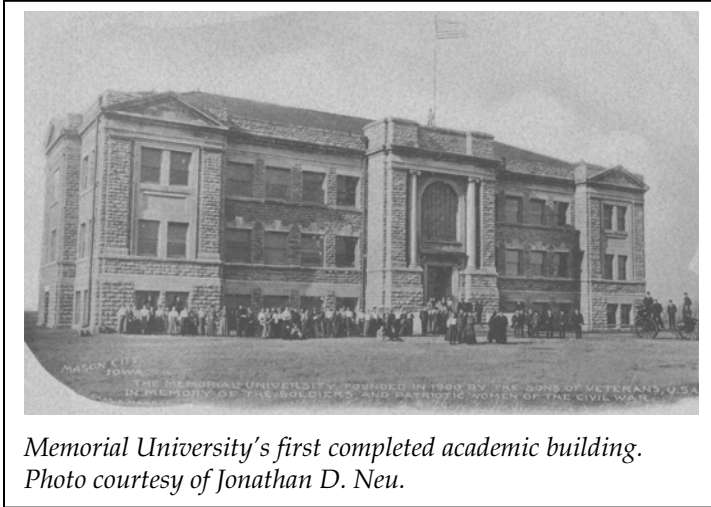
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37. "The Day of Jubilee Is Here," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 6/26/1901; "Memorial to the Grand Army," *Minneapolis Journal*, 3/30/1901.

38. For the SV's debate about and decision on the location of the institution, see *Journal of Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Encampment of the Sons of Veterans* [. . .] (Boston, 1900), 113–28.

39. Minute book entry, 11/23/1901, box 63, Grand Army of the Republic Post Records, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines, IA (hereafter SHSI); "Bulletin of Memorial University, Mason City, Iowa," 6:1 (Sep. 1907), 19; Minute book entry, 12/15/1900, box 108, Grand Army of the Republic Post Records, SHSI.

40. WRC Department of Iowa circular, 10/1/1901, box 1, Grand Army of the Republic, Woman's Relief Corps Records, General Orders and Circular Letters from State Headquarters, SHSI.



leading the way.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, Sortor, his SV allies, and the institution's other civic backers drew up incorporation papers, secured the awarded land in the southeast quadrant of town, sold lots to raise funds (garnering some \$200,000), and authorized construction on the campus's first structure.<sup>42</sup>

With the physical construction of Memorial University started, the founders next turned to developing the school's curriculum and determining its standing alongside the nation's growing network of colleges and universities. The undertaking mirrored a wider trend in American higher education during the Progressive Era. At this time, many colleges were expanding (and, frequently, rebranding themselves as universities) by supplementing their usual offerings with new programs, divisions, and departments aimed at widening their service to society and value to Americans broadly.<sup>43</sup> Sortor and his allies envisioned a

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41. WRC Department of Iowa circular, 4/15/1902, box 1, Grand Army of the Republic, Woman's Relief Corps Records, General Orders and Circular Letters from State Headquarters, SHSI.

42. "Memorial University," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 8/19/1942.

43. John R. Thelin dubs the late nineteenth century as the age of the "Comprehensive American University," in which many historic U.S. colleges extended their reach to incorporate a wider variety of curricula and departments,

similarly comprehensive offering to help Memorial University scholars make their mark in society, contemplating a College of Liberal Arts, a School of Music, a School of Art, a School of Oratory, a Business School, a Dental College, and a preparatory Medical School (though the latter two proposals evidently never came to fruition).<sup>44</sup> Additionally, they conceived a preparatory academy providing secondary education for students as young as thirteen, a service commonly offered by many colleges of the time.<sup>45</sup>

Still, the founders sought unique reasons for prospective students and their guardians to choose Memorial University over the host of institutions cropping up across the country. To do this, they needed to address many commentators' acute concerns that college education was not molding the type of graduates needed for the modern era. Supposed threats to the republic, such as socialists and anarchists, throngs of immigrants, urban and industrial unrest, and resistance to law and order, required a new generation of trained leaders instilled with values of public-spiritedness, service, and devotion to country. In 1892, before students at the University of Michigan, President Grover Cleveland argued that "there is a great need of educated men in our public life, but it is the need of educated men with patriotism. The college graduate

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ultimately comprising a "decentralized alliance of 'schools.'" Roger L. Geiger similarly notes that Progressive Era institutions of higher education "embrace[d] service to society as a fundamental mission, and this view accounts for the great expansion in their scope of activities." See John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Baltimore, 2011), 103–07; and Roger L. Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton, 2015), 363.

44. For the founders' departmental and curricular planning, see "Memorial University," *National Tribune*, 7/10/1902; and Letter of Ell Torrance to Theodore Roosevelt, 7/25/1902, box 36, Ell Torrance Papers, MHS. Incidentally, Memorial University's overambitious commitment to offer programs in a range of diverse fields may have spread its resources and effectiveness too thin.

45. Having a preparatory academy not only provided Memorial University with an additional source of income, but also had the potential to serve as a feeder school. In other words, academy students would be more likely to advance to the institution's college-level courses upon graduation, maintaining their connection with Memorial University. W. Bruce Leslie noted that many colleges of the era only survived by offering secondary education. See Leslie, *Gentlemen and Scholars*, 8, 91–92, 214.



may be, and frequently is, more unpatriotic and less useful in public affairs than the man who, with limited education, has spent the years when opinions are formed in improving contact with the world instead of being within college walls and confined to the study of books."<sup>46</sup> New York Republican (and later senator) Chauncey M. DePew more simply put it that U.S. educators must "teach, first and last, Americanism."<sup>47</sup>

For a university honoring the men and women who had saved the republic, these concerns were particularly germane and offered a chance to advance the principles and characteristics of the Civil War generation as a pedagogical solution. Dedicated as it was "to the memory of the soldiers of the Republic and the loyal women of war times," Iowa's WRC officers acclaimed that the university was "calculated to assist in transmitting to posterity the heritage of a free government and . . . the blessings of American citizenship."<sup>48</sup> Administrators further promised that Memorial University would become "America's greatest university . . . founded upon broad lines as would befit its national character, and make it in all respects worthy of the men and women it seeks to honor."<sup>49</sup> To President Theodore Roosevelt, Al Sortor similarly wrote that the aim of the institution was "to raise the standard of citizenship and produce patriots as well as scholars."<sup>50</sup>

To fulfill this lofty mission and set the school apart from others, university founders prided themselves on three distinct offerings for anticipated enrollees. First was an emphasis on teaching American history and the Union soldier's place within it.

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46. Quoted in George F. Parker, ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Grover Cleveland* (New York, 1892), 354.

47. See DePew's 1888 "Oration on the Political Mission of the United States," in John Denison Champlin, ed., *Orations, Addresses and Speeches of Chauncey M. DePew*, vol. 1 (New York, 1910), 33.

48. WRC Department of Iowa circular, 12/31/1900, box 1, Grand Army of the Republic, Woman's Relief Corps Records, General Orders and Circular Letters from State Headquarters, SHSI.

49. Promotional booklet, "Memorial University, Sons of Veterans, U.S.A.," ca. 1901, box 113.D.3.5B, Department of Minnesota Records, MHS.

50. Alexander L. Sortor, Jr. to Theodore Roosevelt, 7/28/1902, box 36, Ell Torrance Papers, MHS.

Memorial University planners frequently berated other colleges for subjecting students to interminable lessons on ancient civilizations while ignoring the United States' own proud heritage.<sup>51</sup> To counter this blunder, they promised that "especial attention will be paid to American history and civics, and patriotism will be to this institution what creed is to the denominational schools."<sup>52</sup> The plan was one closely linked to the pedagogical musings of the era's educational reformers. Pioneering progressive school activist and GAR veteran Francis W. Parker, for instance, urged that students be taught, "the history of American life, and the genius of American liberty" while being "led to feel the heart-beats of liberty in all ages; to feel in his soul the pricelessness of his inheritance; that he is bought with a price—the suffering and blood of untold millions."<sup>53</sup>

In keeping with this philosophy, Sortor wrote Ell Torrance (now the GAR's commander-in-chief) in March 1902 that it was the desire of the board of regents to have Grand Army veterans direct the organization of its American history curriculum, so it would "be organized in such a manner as to be satisfactory to the men we seek to honor."<sup>54</sup> Torrance selected regional GAR luminaries for the task, including University of Minnesota lecturer James O. Pierce; Iowa newspaper editor and politician Levi B.

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51. In 1907, for instance, then-president William J. Patton stated before a meeting of Wisconsin GAR and SV members that Memorial University believed "it worth more to the young American to teach him our own history and achievements, to give him lessons drawn from the lives of great Americans, and to inspire him with American ideals, than to give the most of our attention, as too many colleges do, to the history, institutions and ideals of the nations of antiquity." See Lucius Fairchild Post meeting minutes, 11/4/1907, box 15, Grand Army of the Republic, Department of Wisconsin Records, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, Madison, WI.

52. "G.A.R. Memorial University," *Des Moines Register*, 3/20/1901.

53. Francis W. Parker, *Talks on Pedagogics: An Outline of the Theory of Concentration* (New York, 1894), 341, 342.

54. Memorial University's board of regents acted in response to an earlier GAR pledge at the 1900 national encampment that officers would assign an Advisory Committee with "power to consult with, advise and assist the Sons of Veterans" in the establishment of the university. *Journal of the Thirty-Fourth Annual Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic* [ . . . ] (Philadelphia, 1900), 254.

Raymond; and Minnesota governor Samuel R. Van Sant. In July 1902, the committee met at GAR national headquarters in Minneapolis to plan Memorial University's American history curriculum.<sup>55</sup> Together, the men recommended that the department of history be elevated to college-status within the university, led by its own dean (a position soon filled by Pierce) and constituting a rigorous four-year course of study.<sup>56</sup> Further, the committee laid out a straightforward teaching philosophy:

We recommend that American History be made the principal object of study in this College; that the era of the Civil War receive especial attention as the most conspicuous event in our history; that the histories of other times, peoples and places be carefully examined in their relations to our own history; that Constitutional History be studied as presenting the highest and most commanding aspects of all History; and that the full courses of study in this College be made compulsory upon all students.<sup>57</sup>

Drawing on their veteran status and a pedagogically reformist bent, the American history curriculum committee promised a unique and compelling educational strategy.

The four-year course of historical instruction sketched out by the committee was noteworthy for its insistence on keeping the restored Union's primacy foremost in students' minds. Freshmen would sit for lectures during their first academic year "to ascertain the leading and fundamental features of our history," covering the colonial, pre-revolutionary, and revolutionary eras in the first term; the post-revolutionary age and the early republic in the

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55. On the meeting, see "College of Hist.," *Minneapolis Journal*, 7/22/1902.

56. The board of regents elected James O. Pierce as the dean of the College of American History in July 1902. After war service as a general's staffer, Pierce was a prominent state-level GAR officer and enjoyed a long postwar career as a lawyer and judge. He earned accolades at the University of Minnesota's college of law where he took up lecturing on constitutional history and jurisprudence late in life. Pierce assumed his duties as dean, noting that he had "made history a life study." See "Judge Pierce of Minneapolis Elected Dean of History College," *Minneapolis Journal*, 7/29/1902. For his first lecture before Memorial University's student body, see his 9/24/1902 address entitled "America's Place in History," in Pierce, *Studies in Constitutional History* (Minneapolis, 1906), 311–25.

57. Report of the American History Curriculum Committee to Alexander L. Sortor, Jr., 8/1/1902, box 36, Ell Torrance Papers, MHS.

second term; and the slavery question and Civil War during the final term (with each term concluding with biographical lectures on "Eminent Americans"). With a nod to the professionalization of historical teaching, Memorial University students would begin seminar work in the sophomore year as "an essential adjunct" to professorial lectures.<sup>58</sup> In courses such as "Making of State Constitutions," "Making of the Federal Constitution," and "History of Federation," second-year students would learn of the unique structure of the U.S. republic.<sup>59</sup> In the junior year, students would receive some instruction in world history—but with the U.S.-centric aim of tracking the "progress in the world's history of the political principles which distinguish the American system of government." Finally, senior-year students would study international diplomacy through "a conspectus . . . of the history of the leading nations of the world during the closing years of the Nineteenth Century, exhibiting constitutional government according to the American type as the dominant influence."<sup>60</sup> American historical exceptionalism, with the history of GAR veterans' Civil War sacrifice made paramount, gave Memorial University's course of study unusual status among other institutions of higher education and provided a bulwark against Lost Cause ascendancy in the postwar memory battles.<sup>61</sup>

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58. Ibid. On the professionalization of historical teaching and the introduction of university seminars, see Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown, CT, 1997), 27–28.

59. American History Curriculum Committee's College of American History, Manual of Study, 8/1/1902, box 36, Ell Torrance Papers, MHS. The committee's emphasis on constitutional history bears the marks of James O. Pierce's involvement in the curriculum planning. Pierce lectured on constitutional history at the University of Minnesota at this time. *The Minneapolis Journal* alluded to Pierce's involvement, stating that the department, under his supervision, would follow "a course of study which he has prepared." See "Will Not Leave Minneapolis," *Minneapolis Journal*, 9/12/1902.

60. Report of the American History Curriculum Committee to Alexander L. Sortor, Jr., 8/1/1902, box 36, Ell Torrance Papers, MHS (emphasis in original).

61. On Union veterans' education-related efforts to defeat "national amnesia" about their sacrifices on behalf of the Union, see Harris, *Across the Bloody Chasm*, 38–40. There are difficulties in tracing how closely Memorial University's course of historical study followed the curriculum committee's July 1902 recommendations.

Conjoined with Memorial University's emphasis on American history was an unprecedented curricular focus on what administrators dubbed "Applied Patriotism" or "Civic Virtue."<sup>62</sup> Though hazily defined, the founders intended the study of applied patriotism "to assist in raising the standard of citizenship by bringing about a greater appreciation of the blessings of a free government and a fuller realization of the responsibilities of citizenship"—a clear attempt to address contemporary criticisms of college students and the education they typically received.<sup>63</sup> Although elevated to department-level status, applied patriotism was not taught in specific courses; rather, it was something university founders intended to "be woven into the warp and woof" of the students' character during their entire academic experience at Memorial University.<sup>64</sup> In other words, administrators expected applied patriotism to spread organically through all courses of study and be supplemented by student participation in special lectures and other events on "patriotic, historical and national

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No course catalogs have been found delineating the university's U.S. history offerings in the early years of the school's operation. It is reasonable to suspect, however, that the committee's recommendations hewed fairly closely judging by later course catalogs. The 1907 "Bulletin of Memorial University," for instance, maintains a rigorous four-year program in U.S. history that provides survey courses for freshmen and emphasizes the Civil War and constitutional history for more advanced students. An entire semester in the junior year dealt with "The Rise and Fall of the Slave Power" and used as its chief text the anti-slavery politician Henry Wilson's three-volume *History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America*. For 1907 U.S. History course of study, see "Bulletin of Memorial University, Mason City, Iowa," 6:1 (Sep. 1907), 10–11. For Wilson's *History*, see John L. Myers, "The Writing of *History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America*," *Civil War History* 31:2 (June 1985), 144–62.

62. Memorial University's development of "applied patriotism" is similar to the rise of "applied sciences" more broadly in Progressive Era education and the pragmatic pedagogy of reformers like John Dewey. Applied patriotism, like applied sciences, was designed to be more practical and utilitarian in improving or fixing social problems. On applied science in Progressive Era U.S. institutions of higher education, see Laurence R. Veysey, "Research," chap. 3, in *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago, 1965).

63. "Memorial to the Grand Army," *Minneapolis Journal*, 3/30/1901.

64. "Bulletin of Memorial University, Mason City, Iowa," 6:2 (Dec. 1907), 6.

topics."<sup>65</sup> Applied patriotism, according to one excerpt from official college literature, was designed for "the development of **Americanism**—the students are to be scholars for the sake of being citizens. . . . Under such a course [the student] is expected to develop a citizenship impossible under the ordinary routine of book study, and to go forth from the school with a full consciousness of individual responsibility and with a willingness to bear it."<sup>66</sup> Further, university founders believed that in the absence of a national crisis whereby young people could express their patriotism through military sacrifice, young people had little direction about how best to devote themselves to the state. Because there had not been "a legitimate opportunity for expression" of young people's commitment to the nation (perhaps expressed best through military service in a conflict akin to the Civil War), one newspaper explained that applied patriotism would help them realize that "good citizenship means a healthy interest in governmental and city affairs, and actual work in caring for a country that has been left to them as an inheritance."<sup>67</sup>

Giving final, physical expression to the infusion of patriotic sentiment at Memorial University, the founders hitched military drill to male students' obligations. Unlike the school's applied patriotism branch, drill on a college campus was not particularly unusual between the Spanish-American War and World War I. Since the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862, all land-grant colleges benefiting from federal government support were required by law to include "military training" in their curriculum.<sup>68</sup> The

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65. "Pledge Support to Sons of Veterans," *Freeport Journal-Standard* (Freeport, IL), 10/31/1907.

66. "Bulletin of Memorial University, Mason City, Iowa," 7:2 (Dec. 1908), 8 (emphasis in the original).

67. "Large Work of Veterans' Sons," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 6/28/1907. The newspaper further asserted the progressive orientation of Memorial University's applied patriotism emphasis, stating that "the object of this branch [applied patriotism] is to teach young Americans to foster the spirit of patriotism which animated the forefathers, and to use it for the betterment of the state; to apply the deeds inspired by patriotic impulse, to the betterment of civic affairs and for the purification of state and national government."

68. Text of Morrill Act, quoted in William M. McKinney, *Federal Statutes Annotated: Second Edition* [. . .], vol. 3 (Northport, NY, 1917), 100.

stipulation was popular with many Americans (particularly Union veterans). Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Congress and state legislatures continued to back supplementary acts in support of military training in institutions of higher education.<sup>69</sup> In Iowa, for example, GAR officials reported favorably in 1896 on the General Assembly's vote to loan state-owned arms to educational institutions that offered military instruction, encompassing some "600 stand of arms in use in the academies, normal schools and colleges of the State."<sup>70</sup> Four years later, GAR commander-in-chief Albert D. Shaw acknowledged that school military drill "develop[ed] both mind and body in a desirable way" and cultivated "national strength of the most desirable sort in times of peace."<sup>71</sup>

Given the school's dedication to former soldiers and its oversight by GAR veterans, Memorial University unsurprisingly made military training a key part of the curriculum and used imagery of the past to inspire the next generation of America's defenders. In a pointed display of the institution's adherence to the memory of Union victory, administrators decided that instead of making cadet uniforms "grey as at other schools," they "will be of union blue."<sup>72</sup> All male preparatory and college students were required to take part in drill and tactics twice a week, unless an enrollee could prove honorable discharge from military service prior to admission. The founders also reserved drill grounds and a rifle pit for their students, secured officers from the Iowa National Guard to lead training, and even planned a naval reserve station at nearby Clear Lake (an idea that was later scrapped). All told, the school's curricular triad—American history, applied

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69. For instance, Congress authorized the War Department to post army officers to teach military drill on college campuses, equip colleges with small arms and other training equipment, and extend military training beyond the land-grant institutions. For more, see Michael S. Neiberg, *Making Citizen-Soldiers: ROTC and the Ideology of American Military Service* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 21–22.

70. See *Journal of the Thirtieth National Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic* [ . . . ] (Indianapolis, 1896), 163.

71. *Journal of the Thirty-Fourth National Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic* [ . . . ] (Philadelphia, 1900), 63.

72. "Memorial University," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 9/11/1902.

patriotism, and military instruction—shaped Memorial University students into an image reminiscent of the Union soldier of the past, girded to defend the nation of the present. With this training, the university vowed that “every graduate shall become a missionary to the country in altruistic patriotism,” sending out scholars to do battle to uphold the GAR’s cherished principles.<sup>73</sup>

### **“We Are Not Going to Send Our Children to Iowa”: The Rise and Fall of Memorial University**

With Memorial University’s curriculum solidifying and construction of its first academic building nearing completion, its founders determined to open the institution for the start of the 1902–03 academic year—a remarkable feat given the brief amount of time that had passed since Sortor secured the school for Mason City. “The patriotic citizens of this city . . . never does [sic] things by halves,” boasted the *Globe-Gazette*, and “fulfilled their obligations by insisting on . . . open[ing] the school at once.”<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, the school’s speedy inauguration belied the fact that it was not initially a university at all. Rather, the institution “for the present . . . will be run as a Military academy and until the larger design has been successfully reached. The academic course will be a three year course and will fit students for the collegiate course when it is established.”<sup>75</sup> Still, administrators lured a talented array of men and women to lead classes in the academy’s preparatory division, the commercial school, and the school of art. They also took out advertisements in regional newspapers to attract students, and sent canvassers to nearby homes to convince parents to send their children to Memorial University. As one student later recalled, a teacher visited her family’s farm and assured her parents that the children would “get more attention there than we would at the [public] high school.”<sup>76</sup> Reflecting their desire

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73. “Bulletin of Memorial University, Mason City, Iowa,” 6:2 (Dec. 1907), 7.

74. “Memorial University,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 9/9/1902. Courtesy of Lee P. Loomis Archive, Mason City Public Library, Mason City (hereafter MCPL).

75. “Memorial University,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 9/11/1902.

76. “Woman Recalls When Building Was Young,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 11/4/1978.



both to maintain the institution's national scope and to ensure Union veterans' involvement, the board of regents also empowered the commanders of each GAR state department and the presidents of the WRC state departments to select a son or daughter of a veteran "of good moral character" to receive a scholarship to attend.<sup>77</sup>

Memorial University formally opened its doors to roughly sixty students on September 10, 1902, with a reception in the newly completed and state-of-the-art liberal arts building (the first of at least a dozen planned for the campus).<sup>78</sup> Three stories tall with thirty-seven rooms and an assembly hall "capable of seating 500 students," the structure was of "Greek architectural design . . . and equipped with the most modern school furniture and the latest devices for heating and ventilating."<sup>79</sup> Opening ceremonies were far more subdued than the previous year's cornerstone-laying events. A visit by President Theodore Roosevelt during his scheduled tour of the region was never formalized, quashing the hope "that every building on the college campus shall be dedicated by some president of the United States to make every building national and historical."<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, assembled students, faculty, and guests heartily sang "America," listened to a prayer of invocation, and heard dean of faculty Walter A.

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77. "A Free Scholarship," *Arizona Daily Star* (Tucson, AZ), 8/8/1902. For more scholarship announcements in other GAR state and territorial departments, see "Free Education," *Albuquerque Citizen* (Albuquerque, NM), 8/8/1902; "Scholarship Free in New Memorial University," *Argus-Leader* (Sioux Falls, SD), 8/14/1902; "Free Scholarship for Veteran's Child," *Washington Times* (Washington, DC), 8/22/1902; "Grand Army News," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, NY), 9/14/1902; "G.A.R. Appointee," *Argus-Leader*, 9/22/1902.

78. Exact enrollment numbers and how many students enrolled in which departments are difficult to pinpoint. School records for Memorial University's earliest years of operation have not been discovered and newspaper reports are frequently vague and often contradictory. I have chosen to place the opening year's enrollment estimate at sixty based on a report given by the Committee on Memorial University at the GAR's national encampment held in Washington, D.C., in October 1902. See *Journal of Thirty-Sixth National Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic* [ . . . ] (Minneapolis, 1903), 283.

79. "Will Open Wednesday," *Evening Times-Republican* (Marshalltown, IA), 9/9/1902.

80. "Memorial University," *Mason City Daily Globe-Gazette*, 9/9/1902.

Doran give an address welcoming the "band before him," which he confidently predicted was "but a beginning of the thousands who should crowd the halls of the University."<sup>81</sup> Al Sortor attended, as well, but according to the *Grand Army Advocate*, "sat as a silent listener during the exercises [and] tears came to his eyes as he thought of what the event passing before him meant, of the struggles, hopes, fears, triumphs and sacrifices which stood behind this day, when training began in the halls of the University."<sup>82</sup>

Despite the haste with which Memorial University was constructed and opened, its first academic year passed largely successfully. The school was proudly coeducational (young men boarded in nearby Lincoln Hall, young women in Barton Hall—nods to the war generation's male and female paragons).<sup>83</sup> Mirroring trends in other contemporary universities, the students assertively organized a wide range of extracurricular activities.<sup>84</sup> Enrollees had the opportunity to join the newly established Lincoln-Fritchie Literary Society or the board of the student-run *Varsity Review*. Besides the requirement to take part in military drill, young men also joined the school's football, basketball, and

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81. Quoted in "The Light That Failed," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 6/1/1953.

82. "Memorial University Opens," *Grand Army Advocate*, Sep. 1902, box 13, Ell Torrance Papers, MHS.

83. Consistent with many Progressive Era educational reformers, Memorial University's founders harbored no qualms about coeducation. Reformer John Dewey proclaimed that coeducation in high schools and colleges was "an intellectual and moral necessity in a democracy." Because GAR, WRC, and SV members readily acknowledged the service and sacrifices of men *and* women on behalf of Union and democracy during the Civil War, it stands to reason that they also understood the importance of coeducation to groom good citizens for the twentieth century at Memorial University. For Dewey quotation, see Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York, 1991), 256.

84. Roger L. Geiger identified a "collegiate revolution" in educational institutions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during which students broke free of some administrative discipline and began organizing their own activities. Fraternities, YMCA chapters, glee clubs, student journals, and athletic teams proliferated thanks to student-led efforts during this time. Memorial University's attendees proved no exception. See Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education*, 365–80. See also, Leslie, "'The Side Shows Have Swallowed Up the Circus,'" chap. 9, in *Gentlemen and Scholars*.

baseball teams, taking part in a nationwide turn toward collegiate athletics.<sup>85</sup> By the end of the second term, total enrollments more than doubled to some 150 students.<sup>86</sup> Capping the school's auspicious first year, in August 1903 the trustees announced the addition of the "energetic, forceful and eloquent" Frederick D. Tucker, head of the Minnesota State Agricultural School, as Memorial University's first president.<sup>87</sup> With growing enrollment, improving reputation, and a top-rate president, Memorial University appeared poised to realize the vision of its founders and carry on the values of the Civil War generation.

A particular point of pride in this regard was the school's first graduation ceremony in June 1903 and the identity of its lone graduate that year. James Leggett was an African-American student, born in Alabama in 1869 to parents who were formerly enslaved. Leggett transferred to Memorial University after studying for three years at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois. He and his wife, Menarvia, boarded at Mason City's Wilson Hotel while he completed one year of study in the College of Liberal Arts. Granted his diploma from trustee W. A. Morris, who "expressed the pleasure" of "being able to give the diploma to one so worthy," Leggett was then feted afterward by "the ladies of the W.R.C." who "presented the young man with handsome bouquets of American beauty roses." Leggett continued his education at the State Normal and Industrial College for Colored Students in Tallahassee, Florida (now Florida A&M University).<sup>88</sup>

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85. Recently elected dean of the college of liberal arts, J. F. Sellick spurred on Memorial University's athletic development. Sellick, who came to Mason City from the Michigan Normal College, was—as the *Des Moines Register* reported—a "believer in athletics" who would help Memorial University "be heard from in the athletic world." See "First Term Successful," *Des Moines Register*, 12/21/1902.

86. Number as reported in "Aid for Memorial University Asked," *Des Moines Register*, 1/29/1903.

87. "Memorial University Has New President," *Des Moines Register*, 8/13/1903.

88. For quotation and proceedings of the ceremony, see "A Colored Man," *Minneapolis Journal*, 6/23/1903. For more on Leggett, see also, "At Memorial University," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 9/18/1902; "First Graduate a Colored Man," *Indianapolis Journal*, 6/18/1903; and "May 26, 1903," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 5/26/1933. Unfortunately, Leggett's later career remains obscure in the historical record.

Newspapers commented upon the appropriateness that the first graduate of Memorial University was black since “the men in whose memory” the university was dedicated “fought thru to many bloody years for the liberation of the slave.”<sup>89</sup>

Notwithstanding measurable achievements made in its first years in operation, Memorial University consistently faced numerous obstacles. Enrollment lagged behind the number needed to keep the institution financially afloat, forcing the school’s leadership to take to the road in search of students and donations. This was not wholly unusual, as college presidents of the era frequently took on the role of fundraisers for their institutions.<sup>90</sup> Like their counterparts in prestigious schools, Memorial University’s administrators sought lavish donations from wealthy backers. However, these requests were rarely fruitful. For instance, an appeal to Pittsburgh industrialist Henry Clay Frick for financial backing ostensibly failed despite much goading from Iowa congressmen.<sup>91</sup> School advocates blamed the failure on the very fact that the university was devoted solely to the memory of Grand Army veterans, which “stayed the hand [and] closed the pocket-book” of philanthropists who contributed funds to educational institutions “only to see their names inscribed over its doors.”<sup>92</sup>

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89. “A Colored Man,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 6/23/1903.

90. John R. Thelin explains that at a time when many colleges had meager administrative structure, college presidents frequently served as chief fundraisers for their institutions. George Keller notes that many college presidents of the era—for example, Charles W. Eliot of Harvard, Daniel Coit Gilman of Johns Hopkins, and James Angell of Michigan—were so proficient at fundraising, they could be termed “academic entrepreneurs.” See Thelin, *American Higher Education*, 99; and Keller, *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education* (Baltimore, 1983), 7.

91. “Aid for Memorial University Asked,” *Des Moines Register*, 1/29/1903.

92. *Journal of the Twenty-Eighth National Convention of the Woman’s Relief Corps* [. . .] (Boston, 1910), 332. George Keller notes that “the history of American higher education institutions has been an unceasing struggle between locating and catering to potential or actual donors who, like modern Medicis, could support the colleges’ unusual cultural and intellectual labors, and protecting the colleges’ central pursuits and freedoms from these frequently powerful and often passionately opinionated patrons.” This appears particularly true for Memorial University. On one hand, administrators desperately sought large donations. On the other, the nature of the university’s founding dictated that only the

Memorial University leaned heavily on the members of sympathetic local- and state-level GAR, WRC, and SV groups. For example, President Tucker sought backers at the June 1905 Michigan GAR state encampment in Traverse City. Calling on veterans there to give "your support, your influence and your aid in this great work," Tucker informed those gathered "that we are building a monument to the patriotic men and women of the civil war [sic], [so] that the children of the land may have a correct knowledge and an honest historical view of the institutions of the country."<sup>93</sup> Although many of these members were enthusiastic, they lacked the deep pockets of the typical university donor. In 1905, the WRC Iowa department raised an admirable, but insufficient, \$850 for Memorial University (outraising twenty other WRC state departments that also contributed).<sup>94</sup> In another effort "to revive some of the latent interest" in Memorial University, Tucker visited the patriotic societies of Decatur, Illinois, hoping to drum up more financial support beyond the meager ten-dollar annual contribution of the city's WRC group.<sup>95</sup>

In the summer of 1906, regent Walter J. Patton addressed GAR and SV state encampments in Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Vermont, and Maine. Patton (who had vital links to the SV as a prominent officer) proved an abler cheerleader and fundraiser than President Tucker. Netting several substantial financial pledges during his eastern tour, Patton succeeded, according to fellow administrator James E. E. Markley, in securing "a net gain over the costs to the institution whil [sic] his time has been spent mostly in correcting the wrong impression, which some how [sic] arose in the minds of the order in the east."<sup>96</sup> His

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deeds of Union veterans (and not of philanthropic industrialists) could be memorialized. See Keller, *Academic Strategy*, 8.

93. *Journal of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Encampment, Department of Michigan, Grand Army of the Republic* [ . . . ] (Lansing, MI, 1905), 83. Courtesy of Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

94. "Memorial University," *National Tribune*, 6/28/1906.

95. "Dr. Tucker Is in Decatur," *Decatur Herald*, 10/20/1905.

96. James E. E. Markley to Alexander L. Sortor, Jr., 7/15/1906, box 36, Ell Torrance Papers, MHS.

success also resulted in his elevation to the presidency of Memorial University in September 1906.

Unfortunately, Memorial University continued to operate primarily as a preparatory academy for local youths during its first several academic years, deviating from its stated mission to serve as an elite national university. In July 1906, Sortor (who remained on the board of regents) received a scathing report from WRC inspectors who censured Memorial University for "the debt of the institution; its lack of standing; its failure to graduate students; that it is not a University . . . and that in many ways it is sailing under false colors."<sup>97</sup> Although school officials advertised that the student body was comprised of individuals hailing from twelve different states, the vast majority were native Iowans plucked from a public school education in or around Mason City.<sup>98</sup>

Newly elevated school president Walter J. Patton subsequently oversaw a reorganization of Memorial University that sought to deliver on the educational promises made by the founders several years earlier. During the 1906–07 academic year, the school introduced a normal department to help fulfill the country's growing need for trained schoolteachers. The department fell under the leadership of Perry O. Cole, who came to Memorial University from his position as superintendent of schools in Cerro Gordo County. Administrators praised the "able and experienced" Cole who had "thorough acquaintance with the public school system [that] enables him to adapt our courses to the needs of that system."<sup>99</sup> Students in the normal department had two options—to take either the two-year course of study that earned them a county certificate or a three-year course that terminated with a five-year state certificate. In either case, normal students took their courses with regular faculty, ensuring that their education fit with the heavy emphasis on American history and civics.

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97. Letter of Alexander L. Sortor, Jr. to Col. William T. Church, 7/14/1906, box 36, Ell Torrance Papers, MHS.

98. *The Memorial University Bulletin, Containing Annual Announcement, Mason City, Iowa, 1906–1907* (Mason City, 1906), 4. Courtesy of MCPL.

99. "Bulletin of Memorial University, Mason City, Iowa," 6:1 (Sep. 1907), 15. For more on Cole's hiring, see "Supt. Cole Is Named," *Des Moines Register*, 8/3/1906.

In a report submitted in 1907 by a WRC committee, the women noted with satisfaction that of the forty students taking normal courses, "thirty-six stood at the head of the long line of Teachers who the County Superintendent examined for honors."<sup>100</sup>

By the 1907–08 academic year, Memorial University at last began advertising its conspectus of college courses for prospective enrollees. The institution offered four-year programs for both a bachelor of arts and a bachelor of science degree with candidates also "required to write a thesis on some subject related to the courses pursued."<sup>101</sup> In either case, students took on a rigorous series of courses in the sciences, mathematics, philosophy, psychology, English, foreign languages, and ethics. Further, in keeping with the school's foundational objective, students were also expected to complete a robust array of American history classes through the entirety of their collegiate experience. "The courses here offered are of a different nature," asserted school officials. "It is one thing to learn that an event happened; it is another thing to know who brought it about, why he did it, what sort of a man he was and how he grew. . . . We assert with confidence that no other college of similar grade offers a course in American history at all comparable to that offered in Memorial University."<sup>102</sup>

Despite the energy that President Patton brought to his post, however, Memorial University still failed to be recognized as an elite national university. The school struggled to shed its image as a preparatory academy for native Iowans. Indeed, Memorial University became an educational option for a certain type of student—"largely boys and girls from the more remote agricultural districts, sons and daughters of poor soldiers who would not otherwise be sent to school."<sup>103</sup> Total enrollments stagnated, usually fluctuating from year to year between one hundred and one

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100. Quoted in "Bulletin of Memorial University, Mason City, Iowa," 6:1 (Sep. 1907), 24.

101. "Bulletin of Memorial University, Mason City, Iowa," 6:4 (June 1908), 10. Courtesy of MCPL.

102. "Bulletin of Memorial University, Mason City, Iowa," 6:1 (Sep. 1907), 10.

103. *Ibid.*, 25.

hundred fifty students (mostly enrolled in the preparatory academy). During the 1908–09 academic year, for instance, the educational report from the Department of the Interior tallied 57 male and 63 female students—in line with estimates from preceding years.<sup>104</sup> Spring newspaper reports consistently announced only a handful of graduates each year, confirming the complaints from disgruntled WRC inspectors. Of these few graduates, most were from the area. For example, of the eight graduates in 1908, all hailed from small Iowa towns.<sup>105</sup> Another problem was that many of Memorial University's college-aged students seemingly transferred out of Mason City to further their education at more prestigious institutions. Common was the experience of "two young ladies who had left the school [and] were admitted to the Senior year in the State University of Iowa, on merit."<sup>106</sup>

Moreover, the patriotic societies that had once sustained Memorial University further cooled in their support. The WRC national apparatus failed to coalesce around a unified plan of action for the struggling institution. When President Patton visited the WRC's 1910 national encampment seeking funds to endow the school's chair of applied patriotism, many members (particularly those from regions benefiting least from the school) responded adversely. For instance, Isabel Worrell Ball, an officer in the Potomac Department, complained that the WRC was losing sight of its true mission. "The Woman's Relief Corps must go straight ahead in its work of caring for the veterans," Ball rebuked. "As long as there is a survivor of the Civil War left, all the energies of my life shall be devoted to his welfare and comfort, and when he is laid to rest I may then turn my attention to Chairs of Applied Patriotism, but not before."<sup>107</sup> The Sons of Veterans also failed to

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104. United States Department of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year Ended June 30, 1909*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C., 1910), 1114. Of this number, 32 students were enrolled in the normal school and 50 students were taking business courses. The rest, presumably, were in the preparatory department.

105. "Memorial University Commencement," *Des Moines Register*, 5/29/1908.

106. "Bulletin of Memorial University, Mason City, Iowa," 6:1 (Sep. 1907), 24.

107. *Journal of the Twenty-Eighth National Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps*, [. . .] (Boston, 1910), 373.



present a united front in support of Memorial University. In 1907, one Ohio SV officer tried to raise funds by means of a new but short-lived periodical, *The Republic Magazine*, which promised to "be devoted to the highest interests of American Schools, American Homes, American Youth, American Men and Women, with patriotism as the foundation principle."<sup>108</sup> Meanwhile, despite President Patton's gestures of goodwill to Sons of Veterans camps in the East, interest there in propping up the institution waned. For example, in 1910, the state SV commander in Vermont reported a mere eleven dollars in camp donations for the university.<sup>109</sup>

Ultimately, many factors—financial straits, stagnating enrollments, disinterest in collegiate offerings, and a loss of support from the patriotic societies—doomed Memorial University. At the SV's 1911 encampment in Rochester, New York, the Sons determined the fate of their relationship with the institution once and for all. Supporters motioned to levy an annual per capita tax of twenty cents to keep the school afloat. During the ensuing debate, however, the inability of the Mason City school to attract a national following thwarted its continued operation. Many SV opponents likely shared one officer's opinion:

It is true that a vast majority of the members of the Sons of Veterans live east of the Mississippi. Of the total membership, I should say . . . that in Ohio, New York and Pennsylvania more than 50 per cent of the total membership will be found. It goes without saying that we are not going to send our children to Iowa to attend the Memorial University. In other words, more than one-half of the members of the Sons of Veterans will not avail themselves of the opportunities offered in the Mason City institution. Then why should we continue to support it, why should we expend any more money for purposes that are of no real benefit to the order as a whole?<sup>110</sup>

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108. Informational circular of H. V. Speelman to Davis Camp #1, 10/12/1907, correspondence box, SV Davis Camp #1, Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall, Pittsburgh, PA.

109. *Proceedings, Twenty-Eighth Annual Encampment, Sons of Veterans* [. . .] (1910), 35–36.

110. "Will Not Aid a University," *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY), 8/25/1911.

Delegates representing nineteen state divisions of the SV soundly defeated the ensuing vote on the per capita tax proposal, 102 to 37, along largely regional lines. Strongest support for the institution came from those midwestern states most directly linked to its benefits—Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Michigan.<sup>111</sup> With the proposal's defeat, delegates decided to withdraw their affiliation with the university and ceased further appropriations. With its parent order's abandonment, President Patton and the administration formally closed Memorial University's doors during the 1911–12 academic year.<sup>112</sup>

### **“A Sore Need of This Very Kind of School”: Memorial University in History and Memory**

Just five years after the shuttering of Memorial University, America's foremost progressive educational reformer, John Dewey, wrote in his influential *Democracy and Education* that for a people to “conduct education so that humanity may improve,” society “must depend upon the efforts of enlightened men in their private capacity.”<sup>113</sup> Despite Memorial University's unfulfilled legacy, the failed endeavor nonetheless revealed the powerful influences that turn-of-the-century Grand Army veterans and their auxiliaries maintained in shaping higher education through efforts that foreshadowed Dewey's call.

Veterans who had fought for democracy and freedom, their wives who supported the effort on the Civil War home front, and their progeny who vowed to carry on their parents' legacy viewed themselves as the enlightened ones. They believed in the righteousness of the Union Cause and its ability to lay the groundwork for higher education in a new, assertive American century.

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111. For vote totals, see *ibid.*

112. Within six months of its demise, the building and grounds were sold and converted for use by the Mason City school district. Memorial University's sole academic building later hosted the town's junior college and was later unceremoniously razed in 1979. “Memorial University Sold,” *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern* (Oshkosh, WI), 2/19/1912; “Plan to Enlarge Building,” *Iowa State Bystander* (Des Moines, IA), 12/12/1912.

113. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York, 1916), 111.

This reformist educational model firmly grounded pupils in an Americanism that continued to embody the broad principles for which the Union soldier had fought—loyalty, service, citizenship, and freedom. In turn, scholars would go out into society as graduates sacrificing for and perfecting a powerful, though discordant, United States.

Admirable as this was, the school faced irrepressible headwinds. With every passing year, fewer and fewer Americans shared a direct memory of the Civil War, and the United States faced modern challenges that made “bloody shirt” cries seem outmoded and inconvenient. When Memorial University opened in 1902, the Grand Army still mustered just over 260,000 members. A decade later, that number had dwindled to just 190,000.<sup>114</sup> The Sons of Veterans, meanwhile, no longer garnered the same devotion as the twentieth century unfolded.<sup>115</sup> The sons and grandsons of Union veterans had their own wars to fight and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and American Legion soon supplanted the GAR as the nation’s foremost veterans’ organizations. The Woman’s Relief Corps still boasted a sizeable membership, fielding some 164,000 members when Memorial University closed. Nevertheless, in an effort to fend off attrition, the WRC began to admit female relatives of veterans of other American wars, further diluting the direct connection to the Civil War. They also began to turn their organizational interests toward new aims—women’s suffrage to name just one—that got in the way of quixotic projects like Memorial University.<sup>116</sup> In many ways, America or, at least, white America was moving on to the exigencies of the twentieth century, and with it, buried the

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114. For membership statistics, see *Journal of the Thirty-Sixth National Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic* [ . . . ] (Minneapolis, 1903), 111; *Journal of the Forty-Sixth National Encampment, Grand Army of the Republic* [ . . . ] (n.p., 1912), 111.

115. On membership declines and ennui within the SV’s ranks, see Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 281–82.

116. *Ibid.*, 282–83.

troublesome sectional disagreements of the post-Civil War years in favor of national reconciliation.<sup>117</sup>

With the shuttering of Memorial University came the end of one of the most daring educational experiments in GAR memorialization—the establishment of an institution of learning that guaranteed a space (in a nation otherwise given over to sectional reconciliationism) for young scholars to honor and learn from the sacrifices of the Union soldier and the principles of the Unionist cause. Here, under the watchful supervision of veterans, their wives, and their children, educators and administrators instructed students with a unique curricular triad designed to inculcate a GAR-endorsed memory of the war and prepare graduates to lead lives of service with it in mind. Through the educational development of scholars' character, courage, and (perhaps most importantly) loyalty to the nation, Memorial University's young men and women could construct a bulwark against those "imbibing ideas of contempt for law and government"—a defense not unlike that which Union soldiers provided against an earlier generation of disruptive secessionists.<sup>118</sup>

Through its reform-minded curricula, Memorial University promised a progressive education that both looked backward on Union veterans' past sacrifices and also promoted mastery in modern patriotism, citizenship, and service to the nation. In 1912, the WRC members gave their final word about the then-defunct institution. "[There was] a sore need of this very kind of school," that taught the "nameless miseries that followed the men and that remained with the women [of the Civil War generation] . . . and a college that [would] instill into the minds of our youth—whether they are native born or children coming to us from foreign shores—this patriotic love and devotion."<sup>119</sup>

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117. See, for instance, Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993); Blight, *Race and Reunion*; and Janney, "A New Generation, 1913–1939," chap. 9, in *Remembering the Civil War*.

118. "Bulletin of Memorial University, Mason City, Iowa," 7:4 (June 1909), 14. Courtesy of MCPL.

119. *Journal of the Twenty-Ninth Annual Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps* [. . .] (Mitchell, SD, 1912), 58.