

General James Longstreet in New Orleans

by: *Joshua Canzona*

This paper was awarded the Loyola University History Award for Outstanding History Senior Thesis for the 2002-2003 Academic Year.

But their memories e're shall remain for us,
And their names, bright names, without stain for us;
The glory they won shall not wane for us,
In legend and lay
Our heroes in gray
Shall forever live over again for us.

-“CSA,” Father Abram Ryan¹

No General in Civil War history saw his post-bellum reputation plummet farther or faster than Confederate General James Longstreet. The man who outranked even Stonewall Jackson in the army of Northern Virginia, was subsequently ostracized by his old comrades because he dared to join the hated Republican party after Appomattox. By throwing his lot in with a bi-racial party of African Americans, northerners, and other supporters of Reconstruction, he was seen as a traitor to the white Southern cause. Had Longstreet remained aloof from the political sphere, he would have entered into the pantheon of Confederate heroes at the side of Jackson and the deified Lee. Instead, while living in New Orleans he chose a very different path. Unraveling this mystery and seeking the General's motivations for this self-destructive political shift is a challenge requiring careful examination. In this way it becomes clear that James Longstreet voiced his unpopular opinions because he honestly believed that in cooperating with the Union the South could be more swiftly healed.

As an old soldier, Longstreet proved incapable of navigating the charged political climate of the Reconstruction era. He spoke his mind and watched his reputation crumble as a result. It did not help that he set up residence in New Orleans, one of the most volatile cities of the post-war era. “A realist, he had accepted the Confederate defeat and endeavored to fashion a livelihood in the postwar nation,” remarks one historian, and it was this pragmatism that marked his life in the Crescent City with such emotional hardship.² During his ten years in New Orleans, the public image of Longstreet in the South shifted from war hero to archetypal scalawag. Examining Longstreet's motivations during this period and the specifics regarding his fall from grace can provide some insight into both the man and the South as a whole during the Reconstruction era. Significantly, the question arises, did Longstreet indeed have an honest belief in Republican politics and rebuilding the South, or was he driven by a desire for personal gain? The answer strikes at the heart of the “lost cause” mythology.

Longstreet's reputation as a military officer was pristine at the end of the war. The Confederate congress praised him as a commander of great prudence and skill in a joint resolution of gratitude for his efforts.³ General Lee favored him with the nickname of “my old war horse” and Longstreet

carried a grave wound from his battles on behalf of the Confederacy. His men held him in great affection for the care he took in planning operations and referring to him affectionately as “Ole Pete.” His defensive tactics recognized the changing technologies of the era and the responsive measures necessary on the part of the commanding General. Compared to the Napoleonic tactics that characterized the Civil War, Longstreet’s strategies were light-years ahead of their time.⁴ As a result, Longstreet possessed a war record that placed him in a position to become one of the most cherished heroes of the developing Confederate pantheon.

After the war, Longstreet moved to New Orleans where the environment was characterized by anger, resentment, conflict, and violence. Reconstruction-Era Louisiana teetered on the brink of disaster due to the factionalism in its politics. Questions concerning the political status of ex-Confederates and the social standing of freed blacks led to resentment among the populace and riots in the streets.⁵ This was not an environment for amateurs such as Longstreet whose blunt persona served soldiering far more effectively than politics. He was, it soon became apparent, out of his league in New Orleans and events were just beginning to heat up. One of the key tensions of the Reconstruction era was the damage to the southern identity – an identity that had been based, at least in part, on an ideology of slavery and racism. The white citizens of New Orleans saw the black population not only freed from the bonds of slavery, but also serving among the ranks of the police, legislature, and courts. Black police officers infuriated whites by actually performing their jobs and taking firearms away from citizens who brandished their weapons in public. David Blight, a modern Civil War scholar, describes these strained race relations, “The bulk of white Southerners had experienced the psychological trauma of defeat; their world had been turned upside down, and they simply could not abide the presence of assertive blacks wearing uniforms and carrying guns, organizing union leagues, or voting and serving in the legislature and on the judicial bench.”⁶ This was a period of great tension and perhaps of desperation as well. White southerners needed to cooperate with their governments to move forward, but found in those very administrations a threat to their culture and personal identity. In the end, the emotionally charged atmosphere led to the creation of an intense hatred for those who seemed to be abandoning the “cause” by supporting, or worse, benefiting from the Republican Party.

Another aspect of this environment and an integral piece of the Longstreet puzzle was the development mythology of the “lost cause.” This nebulous term refers to the revisionist history of the Confederacy as interpreted by post-war Southern whites. Its essential tenets include: the belief that the Union victory was due solely to superior manpower and resources, that the war was not about slavery, that slavery would have been phased out in a new Confederacy, and that the cause of the Southern soldier was one of glory and honor. Some of these broad statements have elements of truth in them, but the context for viewing the Civil War that they are used to create (in which the South is without sin and most of her higher commanders are deified) is blatantly false.⁷

Longstreet’s life in New Orleans must be placed within the context of the growing mythology of the “lost cause.” William Piston in his popular biography of Longstreet writes, “By making defeat seem honorable, the lost cause rationale heightened the South’s already high concept of honor.

Consequently, no group of men ever incurred greater dishonor in the eyes of their peers than the minority of white Southerners who supported the Republicans.”⁸ Longstreet was not just going against social mores in the South, he had unknowingly become the villain in the developing fairy tale of brilliant commanders, southern belles, and dancing slaves. This context is vital to the current historical understanding of General Longstreet, but at the time the man could never have known what

force he was defying.

Longstreet evidently saw some economic opportunities for himself in New Orleans, but they later proved to be illusions. Perhaps he believed that because it was seized early in the war by the Union, and was not a bombed out husk, that the city would quickly rebound as a bustling port where he could find a new beginning. He set himself up as a member in the cotton brokerage of Longstreet, Owen, and Company at number 27 Union Street. He also entered the insurance business as a member of Southern and Western Life and Accident Insurance Company at number 21 Carondelet Street. Unfortunately, he did not do as well financially as he had hoped.⁹ One Longstreet family anecdote concerning both the General's generosity and the poverty of the era tells us, "For several years after the war, Confederate veterans would come by the General's house and tell him they'd just shot a Yankee. The General knew what they were up to. They were poor and thought this would win his favor. The General would play along and give them handouts of food."¹⁰ Railroads had stolen most of the New Orleans cotton trade, the city suffered economically, and many residents remained poor as Reconstruction moved forward.

Longstreet suffered a number of physical maladies during his years in New Orleans that handicapped his efforts to build a civilian career. The General received his most severe injury, a gunshot that ruptured his cervix, at the Battle of the Wilderness on May 6 of 1864. Modern scholarship holds that this wound was caused by Longstreet's own men who had mistaken him for the enemy in a circumstance eerily similar to that which killed General Stonewall Jackson.¹¹ "I received a severe shock from a minie ball," Longstreet later revealed, "passing through my throat and right shoulder. The blow lifted me from the saddle, and my right arm dropped to my side, but I settled back to my seat and started to ride on, when in a minute the flow of blood admonished me that my work for the day was done."¹² The ball had torn through the General's throat and lodged in his right shoulder, thus preventing him from using his right hand effectively. In one letter Longstreet, "I hope that you will excuse this note as I cannot use a pen with any facility, with my left hand, with any facility (sic)." This wound haunted Longstreet for the rest of his life and was listed as his cause of death in January of 1904 when it reopened. The lingering pain was compounded when he worked as a surveyor in the swamps of Louisiana amidst sweltering hot and diseased conditions. Longstreet endured his bad health, bravely, and tried to turn around his financial luck, but a lucky break was not forthcoming and his bills soon piled up.

Longstreet's financial trouble rapidly moved from bad to worse as his business ventures failed and his debts accumulated. The best insight into Longstreet's financial situation during this period comes through his correspondence with the Virginia Military Institute concerning the tuition for his son Garland. These letters and the financial ledgers of the Virginia Military Institute that pertained to the Longstreet balance can be found in the archives of the New Orleans Public Library as part of a court case that was eventually brought against Longstreet.¹³ These documents have apparently gone largely unnoticed since their inclusion in the archives. Longstreet wrote to Francis Smith, the head of the institute, in December of 1868 to explain his financial situation, "I regret to say...that I am entirely out of resources and offer no assurances that I should have any soon."¹⁴ Francis Smith was forced to reply to Longstreet, whom he apparently held in high regard, with repeated requests for the tuition payment. "I would again," Smith wrote, "call your attention to the heavy balance due to this institution on account of your son."¹⁵ For Longstreet, the noble general, to go so long without paying for his own son's military education proves the severity of his post-war financial crisis.

In October 1870 the ledger of the Virginia Military Institute shows Longstreet's balance at \$1407.90. It was paid down to \$1107.90 amidst explanation on the part of Longstreet that his wife had forgotten to mail the check. In the summer of 1871 the institute was compelled to write to Longstreet, "The pressure upon us at this time, since instances involving legal process, compels my appeal to you to close the balance for your son's education."¹⁶ The balance, however, was not closed and eventually legal proceedings were brought in *State of Virginia v. Longstreet* with a court date set for May 23, 1872. The General, in fact, had to pay up, but it seems that his financial luck was finally improving at this time after seven years of hardship.

It is necessary to note, however, that Longstreet's hardships during those first seven years were not merely financial, but social as well. The distinguished General renounced the bitterness expressed by some of his former comrades and supported certain Reconstruction policies less than two years after Appomattox. Thus, it was very early in the new life he was trying to create for himself in New Orleans that he was urging Southerners to accept their losses and work on rebuilding the economy.¹⁷ His most infamous action during this period was to write a series of editorial letters to the New Orleans city papers espousing his post-bellum ideology. This was not received well at all by his former comrades in the Confederacy and it is not hard to see why. In one letter Longstreet writes, "The ideas that divided political parties before the war – upon the rights of the States – were thoroughly discussed by our wisest statesmen, and eventually appealed to the arbitrament of the sword. The decision was in favor of the North, so that her construction becomes the law, and should be so accepted."¹⁸ Longstreet declared the doctrine of a soldier and not a politician and since the war now was one of ideology this did not work in his favor.

The obscuring mists of the "lost cause" mythology make it difficult to examine Longstreet's motivations. The General's contemporaries and some historians have argued that Longstreet's actions were the result of character flaws. Others suggested that Longstreet was inept or otherwise confused when he became a Republican. This latter interpretation seems unlikely, however, given that Longstreet expresses in his letters a clearly defined belief that cooperation is the best course for the former Confederate states. Also, Longstreet's sincere dedication to every professional endeavor that engaged him until the end of his life is a clear sign of his competence. His failure to allow lingering hatred from the war to shape his views should not be used as an indicator of feeble-mindedness on his part.

Some of Longstreet's detractors have suggested that he joined the Republican Party solely for pecuniary reasons. And it is true that the end of Longstreet's most serious money problems can be attributed to his good fortune in receiving a number of government appointments. Within a year of his political conversion he saw his social position change from debtor to surveyor of customs in New Orleans and adjutant General of the Louisiana state militia. In addition to these appointments, he was also made the president of the New Orleans and Northeastern Railroad. By the end of the year he was earning an estimated ten to fifteen thousand dollars in these positions.¹⁹ In terms of purchasing power this would be the equivalent of over \$200,000 a year in modern United States currency.²⁰ The question then, and one that is key in determining the character of the General's political motivations, is whether he received these positions as a direct result of his Republican politics. A surface examination of his financial turnaround might lead one to this conclusion, but there is a time gap to be accounted for. Longstreet first wrote a letter stating his support for Republican doctrines of cooperation with Reconstruction programs in the summer of 1867. Although Republican newspapers praised his views, Longstreet soon found himself socially ostracized in white New

Orleans.²¹ Surely his financial interests in both the cotton and insurance companies that bore his name did not motivate these decisions. Considering that his politics were Republican as early as 1867 and that he was still so impoverished that he was going to debtors court a long five years later, it is impossible to make a direct connection between his political shift and his financial gain. Arguing that no good and righteous Southern gentleman would become a Republican without an ulterior, financial motive is ridiculous; another answer must be found to explain the good fortune of General Longstreet.

Longstreet received his first appointments during the Presidential administration of Ulysses Grant who was extending a kindness to an old friend from West Point. It was common for old friends to end up on opposite sides of the Civil War, and it was not unusual that friendships continued after its close. Grant, however, was occupied in Washington, D.C. and Longstreet lived nearly a thousand miles away in New Orleans. For the time that was a significant distance and their lack of contact after the war does not necessarily mean that they did not give strong consideration to the friendship they shared. In fact, Longstreet's occasional visits to Grant after the war demonstrate an effort on his part to rebuild ties with his old friend in high office. Grant's gesture towards Longstreet in the form of granting him a government appointment that he sorely needed should not be seen as outside of the ordinary political behavior of the 19th century. In a New York Times article Longstreet spoke of his first meeting with Grant after the end of the war: "The next time we met was at Appomattox, and the first thing that General Grant said to me when we stepped inside, placing his hand in mine was, 'Pete, let us have another game of brag, to recall the days that were so pleasant.' Great God! I thought to myself, how my heart swells out to such magnanimous touch of humanity. Why do men fight who were born to be brothers?"²² Thus, Longstreet gave affirmation to the friendship that he shared with Grant and provided insight into the motivations for the conciliatory politics that ruined his reputation in the South.

A sense of honor and duty drove James Longstreet and the politics he voiced were the politics he believed in. His poverty was not immediately alleviated as a result of his changing parties and he initially received nothing except the scorn of his former friends in return for his honest opinions. This was a man who honestly felt that the South would be best served by acknowledging their Northern victors and working to unify the country once more. He raised his pen in the hope that his words and his reputation would be enough to cut through the tangled web of New Orleans politics and to shed new light onto the Southern condition after Appomattox. He failed in this endeavor and, then, unexpectedly he was called upon to draw his sword.

The incendiary environment of New Orleans finally exploded when an effort to overthrow the Government of William H. Kellogg, a hated Republican, was made. The Republican Party in New Orleans had split into two groups by 1872. The Warmoth faction, led by Louisiana Governor Henry C. Warmoth, and Kellogg's "Customs House faction" both vied for the support of the national party and control of the state government. Longstreet, now very caught up in the political scene of New Orleans, allied himself with Warmoth's group and used what influence he had with the Grant administration and the Republican party to support the governor. As a result, Longstreet renounced all three of his high-paying positions: the customs house, position as General of the state militia, and railroad presidency. In return he was given a position as the leader of the militia forces stationed in New Orleans. For a second time the General proved that he had the courage to follow through with his convictions in spite of financial loss.²³ In the end, the factions merged to support Kellogg as their next candidate for governor of Louisiana.

The results of Louisiana's governor's election in 1872 were contested. The rampant corruption common to Louisiana, and the United States as a whole after the Civil War, made the voting process questionable. Republican factionalism in New Orleans had given way to pragmatism and the party united behind a single candidate. The Republicans claimed a victory for their candidate, William H. Kellogg, and the Democrats stood behind John McEnry. A congressional committee investigated the problem and resolved that McEnry was the rightful victor, but a bill concerning the matter never found its way to the floor. Rival legislatures inducted both men to the governor's seat on the same day and President Grant had to step in and resolve the issue by throwing his support behind Kellogg with an executive order.[24](#)

The 1872 election is of the utmost importance in understanding the chaotic environment in which Longstreet was attempting to build his home and business. Today, contested election results give rise to sarcastic bumper stickers and Larry King specials. In New Orleans of 1874, the stage was set for violence with Longstreet in a government appointed position in which he was charged with keeping the peace. The General left the table at Appomattox only to find himself looking in the New Orleans papers each day for the latest incident of severe political conflict or violence in the city streets that might propel him once more into the fray. To try and stick to his guns in such an atmosphere was an incredibly difficult proposition, and to predict what was going to happen next would have been impossible. The political fiasco churned until the opposing sides launched the largest street fight in American history. Angry Democrats had formed the aptly named Crescent City White League to protest the Kellogg administration and Republican rule. The militia and the police, on the other hand, who were charged with keeping peace in the riotous post-election environment in New Orleans included several black officers. The white citizens of New Orleans had strong resentment for the bi-racial force controlled by Northern politicians that patrolled the city, and now they had a vehicle through which they would strike back. Clashes between the two groups became frequent. New Orleans had literally become a war-zone and an aged and wounded General James Longstreet, as head of the New Orleans militia, found himself again in a position at the center of a battle.

Violent reactions from ex-confederates to the changes in the Southern lifestyle after the war were not unusual, but the response against the Kellogg government was unique in its force and fervor. "White rage led quickly to individual and organized violence against the churches, schools, homes, farmsteads, and bodies of black citizens, as well as their white Republican allies," writes David Blight of the Reconstruction period across the South.[25](#) Protests, deadly lynchings, and even the execution of Republican officeholders were common. But a trained paramilitary army in the streets in an effort to overthrow a state Reconstruction government was a scene unique to New Orleans. On August 30th, 1874 the White League executed six Republican officeholders and the Kellogg government declared martial law. Two weeks after the executions, on September 14th, the forces of the White League made their move. A number of men who had fought for the former Confederacy were again armed and put into formation. Their target was the Louisiana state house, then located at the corner of Toulouse and Chartres streets in the Vieux Carré. A full-scale battle was on and the rioters were armed, organized, angry, and had a force that was experienced and trained in the art of making war. Longstreet was now doing more than expressing unpopular political opinions, he was facing off in battle against his former comrades.

The catalyst for the Battle of September 14th, also known as the Battle for New Orleans Freedom or the Battle of Liberty Place, was a shipment of arms aboard the steamship Mississippi. The White Leaguers had arranged for a weapons shipment to augment their growing supplies and Longstreet,

who was aware of their growing strength, wanted to move to intercept it. The General set his force, consisting of 600 police officers and 3,000 militiamen, in a defensive formation along a line from Jackson Square to Canal Street. Also, to further block access to the shipment, he had forces set up between the Custom House and the river. The 8,000 armed White Leaguers, who had organized into a military chain-of-command under general Fred N. Ogden, marched to engage Longstreet that afternoon.²⁶ The anger, resentment, and sheer tenacity of the White Leaguers carried the day as they rushed Longstreet's troops. Battle cries and gunshots rang out across the Vieux Carré as Longstreet's militiamen broke and ran in all directions and even jumped into the river to escape the onslaught. The New Orleans Times reported, "They (White Leaguers) received the fire of the Metropolitan without flinching and kept straight on in their charge. Seeing this, the Metropolitan wavered, scattered, and rushed off toward the Custom House." The police and militia were taking fire from an organized army of twice their number and from snipers set up in various buildings. Longstreet's force was pushed back to Jackson Square where he made a final effort to disperse the rebels.²⁷

The Battle of Liberty Place went poorly for Longstreet and he was extremely lucky to have escaped alive. Officers had to work to keep their men from firing at Longstreet, a man many perceived as vile scalawag and traitor, who was riding upon a horse trying to marshal his troops. As his troops broke and ran, General Longstreet made a last effort to order the mob to disperse, but he was dragged down from his horse and wounded by a spent bullet. With his capture the battle was essentially over. Although it had not lasted long, it was intense and resulted in over a hundred casualties.²⁸ As the wounded Longstreet was being led into the Customs House where the White League was holding its prisoners the victors were shouting out the "rebel yell" in triumph. The General stopped before the door of his prison, took a moment to survey the crowd, and remarked, "I have heard the yell before."²⁹

President Grant eventually interceded by sending Federal troops and three warships to support the Kellogg government and put an end to the White League's insurrection. After Reconstruction ended in 1877, however, Democrats regained control of the city and the Louisiana state government in subsequent elections. The White League's efforts were hailed as heroic. The memory of Liberty Place is a difficult one to place, and a memorial to the White League forces goes largely unnoticed on the neutral ground of Canal Street. Pro-Confederate historian Stuart Landry dedicates his book on Liberty Place to, "The memory of the heroes of the fourteenth of September, whose patriotism should be an inspiration, not only to their descendants, but to all Louisianans of good intent."³⁰

Longstreet was no longer merely an archetypal scalawag, he had led the defense against a force of ex-Confederates who had immediately become heroes of the New Orleans resistance to Reconstruction. As a result of his role in the Battle of Liberty Place, Longstreet's vilification in the eyes of white Southerners was unique in its depth.

Longstreet's service to New Orleans on September 14th deserves more credit than it has received. He was a soldier performing his duty once more with absolutely no regard for his own personal safety in the face of daunting odds. In the aftermath, Longstreet was demonized by the Democrats. For the former second-in-command of the Confederate army to literally turn troops against former comrades was insufferable, and New Orleans became a dangerous place for Longstreet to walk the streets. The General, nevertheless, remained in the Crescent City and continued to work at making a life for himself.

Three years after the Battle of Liberty Place, on March 7, 1877, James Longstreet converted to

Catholicism. Research located in the Georgetown University Archives revealed a letter in which Father Semper of the New Orleans Jesuits comments about the conversion of Longstreet.³¹ Semper writes that when Longstreet had lost the battle of Liberty Place that, “Pain to the General’s heart from the familiar voices opened his eyes to vanity of the world and to supernatural grace.”³² Another possible motivation for doing so could quite possibly be tied directly to his social unpopularity.³³ The Episcopalian Church that he had formerly been a member of, after all, was the traditional religion of soldiers and various upper-class Southern families who were migrating to New Orleans in search of opportunity. If Longstreet’s life was in danger when he walked the streets, it is not a stretch to believe that he did not any longer feel welcome in his old church. It should be noted, however, that James Longstreet did nothing halfway or without conviction and he as known for being a supporter of the Catholic Church until the end of his life.³⁴

With Longstreet’s post-war reputation in shambles it was necessary for the leaders of the lost cause to attack his military record, and the papers of the Southern Historical Society (SHS) provided a forum in 1877. These papers were the mechanism through which the New Orleans based SHS both preserved accounts of the Civil War and crafted the growing mythology of the “lost cause.” The famous reasoning for the Southern defeat, according to the “lost cause” mythology, is that the Union’s superior manpower and resources could not be overcome. What was missing from the argument, however, was a sufficient scapegoat for the battle of Gettysburg, the turning point of the war that seemed a winnable scenario from the historical perspective of the ex-Confederates. James Longstreet’s association with the Republican Party, his role in the Battle of Liberty Place, and the conciliatory sentiments he expressed in the New Orleans papers made him an excellent target. This is not to say that there are not valid military criticisms of Longstreet, but he was being sacrificed for an ideology of portraying fiction as truth. And by becoming a Republican he abandoned the protection afforded to Lee and Jackson who became the untouchable patron saints of the South.³⁵

The charge leveled against Longstreet was that the great burden of responsibility for the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg, the great “what-if” of Civil War history, rested on his shoulders. The accusation, voiced strongly by General J.A. Early, was that Longstreet had been slow to act at Gettysburg and this was responsible for the failure of Lee’s plan that climaxed in “Pickett’s Charge,” a Confederate massacre. Longstreet remained silent against these charges at first, but then he wrote his own account of the battle for the Southern Historical Papers. In this account, Longstreet asserted that he had wanted to fall back and position the Confederate army between Washington D.C. and the Union forces. In this manner the Union army would be forced to fight on ground that the Confederates had chosen rather than vice versa.³⁶ Lee did not agree, and this pained Longstreet but he dutifully executed the orders of his commander with the utmost efficiency and speed.

Longstreet was harshly criticized for his audacity in suggesting that Lee was anything less than perfect as a strategist and commander. In response to Longstreet’s attempt to defend himself, Early wrote, “General Longstreet is of the opinion that he is a very deeply-aggrieved man, because he has not been permitted, without question, to pronounce that General Lee’s strategy in the Gettysburg campaign was very defective; that General Lee had lost his mind when he determined to deliver battle at Gettysburg...”³⁷ At this point it had become clear that in evaluating the Battle of Gettysburg one was called upon, in keeping with the “lost cause” mythology, to make a choice between Longstreet and Lee. James Longstreet had become the scapegoat of revisionist history, so that Lee could remain beyond reproach.³⁸

The long debate over Gettysburg continued on long past Longstreet’s stay in New Orleans, but his

actions in the Crescent City were a major influence on the interpretation of his war record. It's vital to note that Longstreet's reputation during the Reconstruction era led directly to the further complication of one of the most tangled debates in Civil War history. Mrs. Zelia Longstreet, the General's daughter-in-law by her marriage to his youngest son, commented on this in an interview with *Blue and Gray* magazine: "He was a great man. His men loved him. And you know, it wasn't until General Lee died that this business started of other Southerners blaming him for Gettysburg. They knew that General Lee would defend Longstreet's honor. Even General Lee didn't blame General Longstreet for the loss at Gettysburg. The other generals didn't like it that General Longstreet was a friend of General Grant. When he turned Republican and got government jobs through Grant, when he was President, a lot of the South hated Longstreet as a turncoat. I think this hurt him bad, he just wanted to try to help the South the best he could. He was ready to bury the hatchet and be a good citizen."³⁹ The issue was as much about the Battle of Liberty Place as it ever was about the Battle of Gettysburg when it came to the historical interpretation of Lee's "Old War Horse."

If one were to look solely to the experience of General Longstreet, then the Southern situation at the close of the Civil War would seem hopeless. A bleak picture is presented when a recalcitrant South is so opposed to talk of unity with its former foes that it demonized one of its own heroes upon his voicing of support for the mending of wounds. From the high aim of the rifles at Liberty Place to the acidic pages of the *Southern Historical Society Journal*, it seems clear that the "lost cause" is linked directly to a Southern condition marked by stubborn resentment. Time moved forward, however, and as Reconstruction ended the impulse to vilify Longstreet began to wane.

Gaines M. Foster in his book, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, does not interpret the "lost cause" as linked to the idea of a sullen and resentful post-war Southern condition. Indeed, it is important to note that no single interpretation of the motivation behind "lost cause" thinking can be determined entirely sufficient in its analysis of an entire culture phenomenon. Foster addresses the actions of Southerners just after the war in saying that, "perhaps their feelings can best be described as a damaged self-image. Defeat in battle and the exigencies of the war's aftermath wounded southerners' confidence in their righteousness, honor, and manliness."⁴⁰ This idea of the "lost cause" as a sort of therapeutic process in the wake of the events at Appomattox can be compelling. Foster's treatment of Longstreet is brief but insightful given the unique context of his own interpretation of the "lost cause." It is Foster's contention that Longstreet's ongoing historical rehabilitation is a sign of the South's healing from its wounded pride after the loss of the Civil War. Foster remarks that in this new period, "Accounts of Gettysburg now celebrated the glorious failure of Pickett's charge as often as they damned the opportunity lost because of Longstreet's alleged tardiness."⁴¹ The real vindication for Longstreet came with the warm welcomes he received during monument unveilings and Confederate gatherings in the 1890s. Although the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) declined to send him invitations to certain events, he would show up anyway to standing ovations and a steady stream of former soldiers wanting to shake the hand of the General who had cared so deeply for their well being.⁴² Despite these events, however, the issue of Longstreet's reputation remains a hot topic of debate in Civil War circles.

Longstreet has never received the honors and praise awarded to other members of the Confederate high command. The General lived in New Orleans for ten years and his stay in the city is seldom remarked upon. He served the city of New Orleans in a variety of capacities during his residence here and after leaving. For instance, he returned to the city to serve on both the school board and the

board of administrators for what is now Tulane University.⁴³ New Orleans, a city with a strong sense of its own history, has no street named for Longstreet or memorial established in his honor. His choice of sides at Liberty Place, his willingness to risk his life for duty and conviction, earned him little in the way of public historical remembrance. This deserves not only re-assessment, but also recognition that there was something at work in post-bellum New Orleans more insidious than an injured Southern pride.

There is a certain tragic quality to the life of James Longstreet in New Orleans. He made every effort to achieve economic success after the war and met with several years of increasing debts and poverty in return. He outlined his brief opinions on the South's path to post-bellum recovery and found his place in what was left of Southern society lost. Longstreet fought bravely for the Confederacy and nearly died on the field and his legacy became tarnished by a sweeping effort to place the blame for the loss at Gettysburg on his shoulders. James Longstreet suffered for having the courage of his convictions, and to a large degree he suffered unduly.

He cast off most of his laurels when he became a Republican, but his war record was still pristine. Revisionist historians stretched facts and carved up his reputation with surgical precision. The pendulum swings both ways, however, and a more careful examination of "Ole Pete" for who he was as a man, for both his virtues and human weaknesses, reveals that he was not the villain of the South that he was made out to be. Longstreet was an older soldier trying to make a life for himself and his people in a changing world in the best way that he knew how.

James Longstreet was a man of values, the sort of person who said what he meant and meant what he said. Upon his death, President Theodore Roosevelt attributed to General Longstreet, "the fine and high-souled patriotism which made him, when the war was ended, as staunchly loyal to the Union as he had been loyal to the cause for which he fought during the war itself."⁴⁴ This never served him well politically or socially in the demanding society of post-war New Orleans, but his failure to conform to those circles should not now tarnish his reputation. The General was known to have said, "Error lives but a day, truth is eternal," and this is the order to future historians from Longstreet himself. One important step towards this truth is the full integration of his life in New Orleans into the story of Lee's Old War Horse. With this piece of the puzzle in place, and the exercise of a critical eye on the part of historians, then, as on most mornings in the Crescent City, the fog will be lifted to reveal the light.

Notes

1 http://www.fatherryan.org/father_ryan/poetry.htm.

2 Jeffrey Wert, *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 129.

3 CSA Congressional Record, February 17, 1984, No. 42: Joint Resolutions of Thanks to Lieutenant-General Longstreet and the officers and men of his command.

4 Michael Shaara, *The Killer Angels* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1974), 350.

5 Jeffrey D. Wert, *General James Longstreet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1933), 410.

6 David Blight, *Race and Reunion*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 110.

7 It should be noted, however, that the debate of the lost cause is far from over. One example of this is the recently released film "Gods and Generals", described by David Blight, a Yale historian, as a

“celluloid monument to the lost cause”. This charge is based on the film’s exceedingly light treatment of race issues, failure to depict the human side of Generals, and the funding by media mogul Ted Turner that put control of the film solely in the hands of director Ron Maxwell.

8 William Piston, *Lee’s Tarnished Lieutenant* (Georgia: Georgia University Press, 1987), 218.

9 “New Orleans was a dirty, impoverished, and hopeless city, with a mixed, ignorant, corrupt, and bloodthirsty gang in control. It was flooded with lotteries, gambling dens, and licensed brothels. Many of the city officials, as well as the police force, were thugs and murderers”, wrote Henry Clay Warmoth.; Warmoth, Henry Clay. *War, Politics, and Reconstruction*, (New York: MacMillan Co., 1930), 79-82.

10 Interview of Mrs. Zelia Longstreet by Blue and Gray magazine in 1983.

11 Robert M. Steckler, M.D. *The Cervical Wound of General James Longstreet*. Presented at the annual meeting of the American Head and Neck Society, Palm Desert, California, April 26, 1999.

12 Jaynes, Gregory. *The Killing Ground: Wilderness to Cold Harbor*. (Time Life, 1986), 79.

13 New Orleans Public Library Archives.

14 Longstreet to Francis Smith at VMI: December 03, 1868.

15 Francis Smith at Virginia Military Institute to Longstreet: October 11, 1870.

16 Francis Smith at Virginia Military Institute to Longstreet: July 24, 1871.

17 Blight, 263.

18 James Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox...*

19 Wert, *General James Longstreet*, 414.

20 Samuel H. Williamson, “What is the Relative Value?” *Economic History Services*, April 2002, URL: <http://www.eh.net/hmit/compare/>

21 Longstreet, 637.

22 *New York Times*, July 24, 1885.

23 <http://www.enlou.com/people/kelloggwp-bio.htm>; Wert, *General James Longstreet*, 415.

24 Wert, *General James Longstreet*, 416; John Kemp

25 Blight, 110.

26 Kemp, 114 -115.

27 Wert, *General James Longstreet*, 416; Kemp. 114-115.

28 <http://www.agribusinesscouncil.org/Battle-Liberty.htm>; Kemp, 115; Wert, 417.

29 Stuart Landry. *The Battle of Liberty Place*. (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing, 1955), 193.

30 Landry, book dedication.

31 Georgetown University Special Collections: Thomas Meehan Letters.

32 Letter from Father H.C. Semper, S.J. to Fr. Thomas Meehan, January 26, 1910.

33 Yet another possibility is that he was influenced towards Catholicism by his second wife and this is mentioned by some of his biographers and in the Thomas Meehan Letters. This, however, doesn’t make sense given that he converted a number of years before moving to Georgia and meeting Helen Dortch, his second wife.

34 Wert, 418.

35 Wert, *James Longstreet and the Lost Cause*, 131; General J.A. Early, Reply to Longstreet’s Second Paper, *Southern Historical Society Papers*, 270.

36 From Shaara’s *The Killer Angels*; Lectures of Dr. Michael Ross, Loyola University New Orleans, Fall 2002.

37 *Southern Historical Society Papers*, Vol. 5, 270.

38 Wert, James Longstreet and the Lost Cause, 131.

39 Interview of Mrs. Zelia Longstreet by Blue and Gray magazine in 1983.

40 Gaines M. Foster. Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 35.

41 Foster, 120.

42 Shaara 350, Foster, 120, Wert, General James Longstreet, 424-425.

43 Wert, General James Longstreet ,418.

44 In a letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Helen Longstreet, June 07, 1904; <http://www.tennessee-scv.org/longstreet/post1.htm>.