McPherson Monument, Central Park, McPherson, Kansas.
I cannot refrain from saying all Hail to patriotic Kansas which in these days of lethargic patriotism has completed this enduring memorial to brave Major General James Birdseye McPherson. . . . Long live McPherson in the hearts of his countrymen! And long live Kansas for her patriotic devotion to the American Flag and it’s [sic] brave defenders!" Mrs. John A. Logan, whose husband served as a distinguished Civil War general and politician, delivered this message to the residents of McPherson, Kansas, following their unveiling of an equestrian statue memorial to Civil War general James Birdseye McPherson on July 4, 1917. The special case of General McPherson provides historians with a fascinating study in memory, especially in regard to the process of forgetting. Despite an impressive service record, a heroic death, and widespread adoration and fame during the Civil War, McPherson has largely become a forgotten individual. The collective memory of McPherson has faded so much over the past century that few individuals other than professional historians and Civil War enthusiasts even know of his contribution to the Civil War. However, the town of McPherson, Kansas, provides a rare case study because, unlike most of the country that did not remember McPherson, this community has made a concerted effort to recognize and honor the general. One of the ways that residents achieved this undertaking was by linking the memorialization of General McPherson to the honoring of all U.S. servicemen and to patriotism in general.

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2. Here I use the term “collective memory” to refer to the memory of the nation as a whole.
In recent years, the study of history and memory has become a growing field among professional historians. Memory studies have broadened historians’ perspectives, allowing them to examine the way an event or an individual has been remembered. Although individuals possess personal and distinctive memories, many historians agree that there also exist commonly shared memories, referred to as collective or social memory. Memory scholars believe that groups shape collective memories to create meaning for those who are attempting to maintain a particular memory. Maurice Halbwachs, the chief developer of the concept of collective memory, wrote, “Collective memory . . . is a current of continuous thought whose continuity is not at all artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of groups keeping the memory alive.” The construction of the McPherson memorial demonstrates how societies collectively remember individuals and form a shared memory. It further illuminates the fact that communities indeed shape their memories to provide special significance and meaning to the time in which they live. Another memory scholar, Paul Connerton, makes a link between collective memory and commemoration ceremonies. For Connerton, commemorations embrace a collective memory through ritual performances. Dedication speeches, marching bands, and the singing of patriotic songs—all of which were present for the McPherson memorial’s unveiling ceremony—constitute what Connerton calls “a cult enacted.” A study of the McPherson memorial, particularly the commemoration ceremony, helps to elucidate the memory theories of both Halbwachs and Connerton.

The construction of a memorial, or a monument that possesses meaning beyond the simple recognition of the individual to whom it was dedicated, is certainly not unique to the McPherson case. In fact, the linking of memorials of past heroes to contemporary ideas of patriotism and nationalism was common in commemorations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Several historians have examined the connection between commemoration, memory, and patriotism in the construction of memorials and monuments. Not unlike scholars of collective memory, these historians explain that through memorialization and commemoration, societies often draw upon past events to give special meaning to the present. Historian David Blight demonstrates that Civil War commemoration ceremonies were often used for reasons other than simply honoring past heroes, for instance, to marginalize African Americans while promoting a Southern agenda. One striking example provided by Blight is the dedication ceremony for the Robert E. Lee equestrian statue in Richmond, Virginia, in 1890. Instead of focusing the commemoration on Lee, the event turned into a spectacle that promoted the Lost Cause—an explanation for Confederate defeat that downplayed the role of slavery in the Civil War. Tens of thousands of ex–Confederate soldiers attended the unveiling, waving Confederate flags and embracing their identity as a people who were still unwilling to submit fully to Northern rule. Speakers trumpeted the “just” causes of the war, which, according to them, included fighting for “liberty” and “freedom” as well as for “love of state and love of home.” Slavery was conveniently forgotten as a major cause of the war, primarily as a way for Southerners to control African Americans’ role in society in the postwar environment. Advancing the Lost Cause was extremely important to Southerners’ identity in the post–Civil War era. This example illustrates one way that commemorations had special meaning to the groups that erected memorials.

Like the Lee statue, the McPherson memorial also possessed added meaning for those living in 1917, much more than simply honoring the general. Examining the unveiling of the McPherson memorial also confirms the
notion that monument and memorial commemorations were often transformed into celebrations of patriotism to reflect the current state of affairs. The erecting of the McPherson memorial coincided with the United States’ mobilization for World War I. That the unveiling ceremony occurred on Independence Day enhanced the event as a celebration of patriotic fervor.

Although Blight’s thesis has been highly regarded by history and memory historians, not all scholars agree with his assessment concerning the centrality of reconciliation. Specifically, Caroline E. Janney, in Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation, argued that reconciliation between North and South did not come easily and that many Union veterans refused to abandon their narrative that the war had been fought for the preservation of the Union and emancipation. Joan Waugh’s research additionally strengthened Janney’s argument. Waugh examined Ulysses S. Grant’s efforts, through the publication of his Personal Memoirs, to maintain the memory of the Union cause even as the forces of reconciliation were eating away at that narrative. Therefore, the subject of Civil War memory certainly remains an appealing and highly debated topic.

In addition, several valuable works have recently examined Civil War memory specifically in the context of monument building. In Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and the Monument in Nineteenth-Century America, Kirk Savage explored the construction and meaning of Civil War monuments. In order to fully appreciate the story behind the McPherson equestrian statue, it becomes important to place it within the greater realm of Civil War monument construction, and Savage’s work provides an excellent analysis of the motivation behind Civil War monuments. He argued, “Monuments attempt to mold a


landscape of collective memory, to conserve what is worth remembering and discard the rest.” However, as Savage demonstrated, the “discarded memory” often came at the expense of African Americans’ marginalization. Even when Civil War monuments emphasized the centrality of slavery and focused on emancipation, the narrative frequently highlighted the role of Abraham Lincoln, who became “the Great Emancipator,” and downplayed the role of African Americans in their own emancipation. Therefore, monuments became a tool not only for shaping the collective memory of the Civil War but also for defining the nature of American society and the African American role within that society. Fully understanding the nature of Civil War monuments helps clarify the account of the McPherson memorial.

Examination of the McPherson memorial also complements the study of Kansas history and Kansas memory. Several articles have recently been published exploring the nature of the collective memory of Kansas. Many of the scholars who examine Kansas memory draw on Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities.” Writing on the subject of history and memory as it relates to Kansas, historian and editor Virgil W. Dean noted, “Remembrance leads us toward an identity as Kansans, or to what has been called ‘imagined communities.’ It leads us away from a preoccupation with the ‘image’ of Kansas, as determined elsewhere, and toward a healthy consideration of the identity of Kansas, as we ourselves imagine it.”

Like previous studies, an examination of the McPherson equestrian memorial also reveals much about Kansans’ “imagined” identity as well as the values held by many Kansas residents in the early twentieth century.

Much of the interest in Kansas memory has focused on memorialization, and Professor of English Steven Trout and archeologist Randall M. Theis both approached the issue of memorial building. Trout surveyed the construction of World War I monuments throughout the state of Kansas during the 1920s and 1930s. Central to Trout’s analysis was the fact that over time many of the memorials either lost their significance to the local community or drastically altered in meaning. Theis, in contrast, focused on one particular memorial—the Kinsley Civil War Monument in Kinsley, Kansas. However, as in the cases of memorials examined by Trout, Theis identified a diminished significance and a lack of understanding of the Kinsley monument by local residents that occurred gradually over time. A similar shift occurred in the meaning of the McPherson memorial.


11. Although many historians have long pondered the relevance of Kansas memory, several authors have recently examined the topic in a special issue of Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains published to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Kansas statehood. See, especially, Thomas D. Isen, “The Enterprise of Kansas History,” Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains 34 (Spring 2011): 12–27; and Bruce R. Kahler, “John A. Martin, Soldier State Visionary,” Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains 34 (Spring 2011): 50–59.


In addition to collective memory, memorialization, and Kansas history, the McPherson memorial provides a useful analysis of the issue of civic pride. Although the desire to honor General McPherson played a major role in the town’s decision to erect a memorial, there were unquestionably additional factors that contributed to the community’s determination—including a desire to promote the town and boost local business. In the early twentieth century, McPherson experienced significant growth. Between 1910 and 1920, the town grew from 3,546 residents to 4,595, an increase of 29.6 percent, and certainly appeared to be a town on the rise. Along with the growth of McPherson there emerged a desire to promote civic pride and attract new businesses through boosterism. The construction of an equestrian statue to honor General McPherson was one way residents hoped to accomplish this goal. Over time, however, the meaning of the memorial gradually acquired new layers of significance. What began as an attempt by locals to exhibit civic pride and boost business eventually evolved into a symbol of patriotism during America’s mobilization for World War I. The memorial gained additional meaning not only by honoring General McPherson himself but also by memorializing all Civil War veterans. A final layer of the monument’s significance eventually incorporated a testament to the sacrifice of all U.S. servicemen, which has continued to the present day.

General McPherson served a long and distinguished career in the U.S. Army prior to the outbreak of the Civil War. He graduated first in his class at West Point in a group that included future notables such as John Bell Hood, John M. Schofield, Oliver O. Howard, Philip H. Sheridan, and J. E. B. Stuart. Following graduation, he distinguished himself as an engineer, building the defenses of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay. Once the Civil War began, McPherson sought an engineering command in the field, and he soon found himself serving under Ulysses S. Grant in the Western Theater.

Grant and McPherson became close friends, and through this relationship the latter’s military career blossomed. He quickly moved from a member of Grant’s staff to a division commander and eventually to commander of the Seventeenth Corps in Grant’s Army of the Tennessee. McPherson performed admirably in some of the most decisive battles in the West, including Shiloh, Corinth, and the capture of Vicksburg. Grant considered McPherson one of his most trusted and capable subordinates, and after Grant’s promotion to lieutenant general and transfer to the Eastern Theater, General McPherson took command of the Army of the Tennessee and reached the pinnacle of his military career, and also his tragic end, during the Atlanta Campaign. McPherson was the highest-ranking Union officer and the only Union commander of an army killed during the Civil War, and he died at a time when his star was on the rise. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.


Grant considered McPherson one of his most trusted and capable subordinates and often showered praise on him; he also advocated for McPherson’s advancement. In March 1863, for example, Grant petitioned Congressman Elihu Washburne: “McPherson is one of my best men and is fully to be trusted. Sherman stands in the same [category]. In these two men I have a host. They are worth more than a full Brigade each.” Grant typically spoke of McPherson and William Tecumseh Sherman as equally gifted commanders. Following the successful capture of Vicksburg, Grant appealed directly to President Lincoln to promote McPherson and Sherman to the rank of brigadier general in the regular army, writing, “[McPherson] is one of our ablest Engineers and most skilful Generals. The promotion of such men as Sherman and McPherson always add strength to our Arms.” Grant’s favorable opinion of McPherson’s capability was shared by many politicians in Washington and much of the Northern public.

Following Grant’s promotion to lieutenant general and transfer to the Eastern Theater, General McPherson took command of the Army of the Tennessee. Serving under the direct command of Sherman during the Atlanta campaign, McPherson reached the pinnacle and tragic end of his military career. Throughout the campaign, McPherson performed brilliantly, repeatedly using the Army of the Tennessee to outmaneuver Confederate general Joseph Johnston’s forces. Eventually, McPherson forced Johnston’s army into the defenses of Atlanta. When Confederate general John Bell Hood replaced Johnston, McPherson’s ability was truly tested. McPherson and Hood had attended West Point together, and McPherson believed he knew his old friend fairly well and could predict where he would attack Sherman’s army. “Trusting his instincts, McPherson ordered Grenville M. Dodge’s corps to where he believed the Confederate attack would take place,” just in time to meet Hood’s offensive. McPherson’s decision ultimately saved Sherman’s offensive from a potential disaster. However, during the fighting, McPherson unexpectedly encountered enemy skirmishers. “Unwilling to surrender, McPherson removed his hat, bowed to the enemy, and wheeled his horse back toward safety.” The rebels shot McPherson in the back and killed him.

McPherson was the highest-ranking Union officer and the only Union commander of an army killed during the Civil War, and he died at a time when his star was on the rise. “The army and the country have sustained a great loss by the death of McPherson,” wrote Sherman. “I had expected him to finish the war. Grant and I are likely to be killed or set aside after failure to meet popular expectation, and McPherson would have come into chief command at the right time to end the war. He had no enemies.”


18. Dudley, “From Capitol Hill and West Point,” 84. Most Civil War historians generally agree that McPherson’s death was the result of neither foolhardy bravado nor carelessness but poor luck and an unwillingness on his own part to surrender.

McPherson’s death was greeted with sorrow by the Northern public and deeply affected the commanders of the Union armies. Despite McPherson’s notable contribution to the Union victory in the Civil War and his heroic death during one of the most decisive battles of the conflict, the memory of McPherson has faded over time. One of the earliest biographies devoted specifically to General McPherson, aptly titled Forgotten Hero: General James B. McPherson, did not appear until 1955. Its author, Elizabeth J. Whaley, wrote that McPherson’s “accomplishments during the Civil War appeared on the pages of every newspaper and were known to every American. . . . Through the irony of fate, few historians of today make mention of his name, and Americans as a whole have never heard it.”

Dozens of biographies and monographs have been written about Sheridan’s and Sherman’s Civil War service, whereas McPherson, surprisingly, has had very little written in comparison. Since Whaley’s biography, few scholars have followed with significant research. In addition to the absence of abundant scholarship, no historian has yet attempted to concentrate primarily on a memory study of McPherson, nor have any McPherson scholars provided more than a cursory reference to McPherson, Kansas.

The town took its name from McPherson County, which was officially organized on March 1, 1870; like many Kansas counties, it received the name of a famous Civil War hero. The actual township of McPherson was laid out by a group of Salina businessmen in June 1872 and “incorporated as a city of the third-class on March 4, 1874.”

The term refers to the period between roughly 1885 and 1918, which witnessed an explosion of monument building across the state. McPherson’s citizens had long desired to honor the general with a memorial. The largest obstacle that delayed the construction of such a memorial was the issue of funding. The “Official Souvenir”—a program of fifty-six printed pages prepared for the attendees of the unveiling ceremony in 1917—claimed that “for years this dream was only a dream, but about four years ago the patriotic societies of the county got together and organized from their number the Gen. Jas. B. McPherson Monument Association for the purpose of erecting a suitable memorial to the general for whom the county was named.”

The town’s decision to erect a statue of the general best demonstrated McPherson’s special significance. The construction of the monument came near the end of a period known as the “Great Monument Era” in Kansas. The term refers to the period between roughly 1885 and 1918, which witnessed an explosion of monument building across the state. McPherson’s citizens had long desired to honor the general with a memorial. The largest obstacle that delayed the construction of such a memorial was the issue of funding. The “Official Souvenir”—a program of fifty-six printed pages prepared for the attendees of the unveiling ceremony in 1917—claimed that “for years this dream was only a dream, but about four years ago the patriotic societies of the county got together and organized from their number the Gen. Jas. B. McPherson Monument Association for the purpose of erecting a suitable memorial to the general for whom the county was named.”

The year 1870 was still close enough to the end of the Civil War that McPherson would not yet have been a forgotten hero. Information on the founding and naming of McPherson was located with the assistance of David Nigh, president of the McPherson County Historical Society. Several original settlers in McPherson County were from Ohio, including J. J. Colby, Thomas M. Middleswart, Eathan A. Stookey, Edward Swander, John U. Fellows, and Bernhard Reichert. These individuals settled in Lone Tree Township and King City Township.


21. One of the primary reasons McPherson scholarship has been scant is the fact that his personal papers are not extensive. The James Birdseye McPherson Papers, located at the Library of Congress, contain only one box with 364 items. The Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library contains miscellaneous papers relating to McPherson, including six of his personal letters. Two factors explain the relatively small amount of McPherson’s papers. First, he was not known for being a particularly fastidious record keeper. Second, many of the letters he wrote during the Civil War were to his fiancée, whose family was Confederate sympathizers and burned the majority of the letters she received from the Union general. Other than Whaley’s biography, the major McPherson scholarship includes Waldsmith, General James B. McPherson; Tamara Moser Melia, “The Gallant Knight: The Life and Early Career of James Birdseye McPherson” (master’s thesis, University of Southern Illinois, 1979); and Melia, “James B. McPherson and the Ideals of the Old Army” (PhD dissertation, University of Southern Illinois, 1987).

22. William G. Cutler and Alfred T. Andreas, History of the State of Kansas (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883), also available online under “McPherson County” at www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/mcpherson/mcpherson-co-p1.html#EARLY_HISTORY/. The year 1870 was still close enough to the end of the Civil War that McPherson would not yet have been a forgotten hero. Information on the founding and naming of McPherson was located with the assistance of David Nigh, president of the McPherson County Historical Society.

23. Waldsmith, General James B. McPherson, 319; Mitch Holthus, “Memorial Day 2009 Speech by Mitch Holthus,” City of McPherson, Kansas, www.mcpcity.com/?deptid=1&pageid=55; Cutler and Andreas, History of the State of Kansas, 822. Several original settlers in McPherson County were from Ohio, including J. J. Colby, Thomas M. Middleswart, Eathan A. Stookey, Edward Swander, John U. Fellows, and Bernhard Reichert. These individuals settled in Lone Tree Township and King City Township.

The association, led by President John M. Van Nordstrand, became the primary organizing force behind the monument project. Van Nordstrand represented the Grand Army of the Republic. Women’s organizations also played an important role. Significant women’s organizations represented in the association included the Women’s Relief Corps, the Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic, and the City Federation of Women’s Clubs. Other organizations in the association included the Board of Trade and the McPherson Travelers.26

The town’s population growth and the residents’ desire to promote their town and attract new business influenced the community’s decision to erect a memorial to McPherson. In early 1913, just prior to the town’s decision to construct a memorial, the McPherson Weekly Republican printed ten suggestions for the town for the coming year. The first called for “the hearty co-operation of all the people, the organizations and the community for those things which make for a bigger and better town.” An additional proposal recommended that the Board of Trade reach out and increase McPherson’s markets, “which should be enlarged so as to give McPherson its just share.” Yet another suggestion urged the town to beautify its parks. The recommendation that exemplified the goals of the town in 1913 was to “encourage the Chautauqua [an adult education movement], the Fair, the band and [to] boost for attractions that will bring people from over the county and help all to become acquainted and get out of business ruts.”27

Throughout 1913, the McPherson community demonstrated signs of civic pride and boosterism. Foreshadowing the memorial’s unveiling ceremony four years later, the town planned for a large Fourth of July celebration. The purpose of the festivity was not only to observe Independence Day in a patriotic manner but also to advertise the attractiveness of


McPherson to outsiders. A June 20, 1913, McPherson Weekly Republican article stated that the aim of the day's events was “letting the outside world know of the splendid possibilities there are in this county, of the bargains that can be had here as compared to the east.” The unnamed author believed that once outsiders could “be convinced that in Kansas they can become independent land owners, they can be easily induced to come and locate here.” The town considered the July 4 celebration to be a major success, primarily because it drew the largest crowd the small town had ever hosted, with approximately 20,000 people in attendance. Following this event, the town continued to endeavor to attract additional residents and new business. The Board of Trade planned to distribute a sixteen-page pamphlet specifically designed to “show what McPherson has to offer and by what a prosperous community it is surrounded.”28 Shortly after the decision to print and distribute this booklet, the town’s residents decided to broaden the theme of civic pride by constructing a monument to the man for whom the town was named.

Many McPherson residents viewed 1913 as a significant year for the town and its continued growth. In January 1914, an article in the Republican claimed that “there has been an added awakening of McPherson people in the pride of the town and a consciousness that McPherson has the ‘stuff.’” In a continued effort to enhance the attractiveness of the town, the residents undertook a campaign to beautify the local parks. During this project, the community developed a plan for a memorial for General McPherson in Central Park. The idea appealed to those residents who wanted to show off the town and attract additional residents and new business. The crowd that eventually attended the memorial’s unveiling ceremony was double that of the July 4 celebration in 1913. In a clear demonstration of the connection between civic boosterism and the McPherson memorial, the same Weekly Republican issue that reported on the detailed plans for the monument also announced the distribution of 1,000 pamphlets intended to promote the town and attract future residents.29 The town remained committed to honoring General McPherson. However, the timing of the decision to do so underscored the significance of civic pride and the desire to draw in people and business through boosterism.

Initially, the town’s residents anticipated a relatively small monument, but soon “the efforts of the association were received with such hearty encouragement that plans were being considered for such a statue as nowhere existed in the state—a life-size equestrian bronze.”30 As the association began to look into commissioning a reputable sculptor to construct the memorial, the estimated cost was approximately $30,000. Such a price at first dismayed the association, but it soon found John Paulding of Chicago, who agreed to build the statue for $15,000. Even at this reduced cost, funding for the project remained a major challenge. The first attempt to raise revenue for construction came when the state legislature levied a county tax in order to cover a portion of the expense. The town raised the remaining balance through volunteer subscriptions from local citizens.31 For example, the association contacted local teachers in McPherson to help fund the memorial project. In a letter requesting support, I. C. Meyer, the McPherson County superintendent of schools, stated, “You are no doubt fully aware of the great patriotic effort being made by the citizens of McPherson County to erect a monument to the memory of [General James] B. McPherson. . . . Every citizen of our county has and should have a very personal interest in this great undertaking.” By the time this letter was written, the association had already collected all but $2,000, yet it stressed that every school and schoolchild would “want a part in this great monument that will be a thing to go down to posterity.” Meyer closed the letter by writing, “The teachers of McPherson County can do a great service toward making the erection of this monument a success. We owe it in a patriotic spirit. I hope you will make a worthy effort.”32

Meyer’s letter represented a shift that was occurring in the association’s vision. The original motives—which included civic pride and boosterism—were still present, but patriotism was becoming the more significant factor for the town. Whether through taxes or subscriptions,


On the morning of July 4, 1917, a parade down Main Street passed by the reviewing stand, which held Governor Arthur Capper; General Nelson A. Miles, perhaps the nation’s most distinguished living military commander at the time; and several other honored guests. Courtesy of Ward Ferguson and the McPherson Public Library, McPherson, Kansas.

the local residents bore the entire burden of the cost for the memorial. Throughout the entire process, the residents depicted support for the monument as an act of patriotism, thus appealing to a wide range of local residents and adding an additional layer to the meaning of the memorial.

Although the unveiling of the McPherson monument accomplished a number of objectives—including promoting the town—there remained a concerted effort to remember the general. The town demonstrated particular concern for honoring General McPherson and educating the residents about his life and service. Prior to the unveiling of the memorial, the Republican published a piece on McPherson’s life. The article provided a biographical sketch of McPherson from his childhood to his death. The article’s purpose was clearly to educate McPherson residents who perhaps were unaware of the man for whom their town was named. The approaching dedication of the memorial provided the perfect opportunity to inform those interested individuals about McPherson’s illustrious life and heroic death. Although the eventual unveiling ceremony shifted its focus to serve other purposes, efforts were nevertheless made to maintain some attention to McPherson the man.33

The decision to build the statue was well publicized, and the town planned for its unveiling ceremony on an epic scale. Not only did McPherson residents expect 30,000 people from throughout the state of Kansas to attend, but they also invited several prominent speakers to mark the occasion, including General Frederick A. Funston, General Nelson A. Miles, and Mrs. John A. Logan. Even prior to the unveiling of the memorial, it appeared that the statue had more significance than simply honoring General McPherson or even promoting the town. On January 5, 1917, the Republican published Mrs. Logan’s response to her invitation: “All [too] few testimonials of the gratitude of the American nation to the soldiers of [the] 1861–65 [conflict] are built, and my heart is delighted whenever I hear anything being done to perpetrate the memories of these gallant men.”34 Logan’s words reflected the widespread opinion that the memorial had the greater purpose of honoring the service and sacrifice of all Civil War veterans.

Indeed, there existed clear cause for Mrs. Logan’s opinion, as demonstrated by the fact that a large tablet with the names of all Civil War veterans from McPherson County would accompany the McPherson memorial. Several months prior to the unveiling, the Republican published a list of the names that would be placed on the tablet. It stated that the association “desires that the name of every Union veteran who is now or has been a citizen of McPherson county should be on this bronze tablet.”35 The Official Souvenir from the unveiling ceremony referred to the tablet as “The Tablet of Fame.” In a vein similar to that of the Republican article, the Souvenir described the association’s efforts not to overlook any local veterans, stating that “the committee decided to make an appeal for support from patriotic people who

would not wish to have a single deserving veteran’s name omitted.” In addition, it noted that although the cost of the monument was provided for, the Tablet of Fame was not. “Consequently it was decided to sell 752 medals [one for each veteran listed on the tablet] at a dollar a piece—a dollar for a soldier’s name.” It emphasized that “as the number is limited, it will be a distinction in years to come to own one of these medals of award for patriotic service in honoring the patriot who fought for us the battle of freedom.” The Tablet of Fame, as well as the campaign to raise money for its construction, further indicated an aspiration to associate the memorial with all McPherson County Civil War veterans.

The McPherson memorial, once completed, did indeed live up to many of the residents’ expectations. The Official Souvenir proudly described the finished equestrian statue. Because McPherson had fallen as he scouted the enemy lines, sculptor John Paulding desired the statue to reflect this moment just before his death. “The sculptor’s conception is that of the general advancing before his command, reconnoitering the line of battle, and the intensity of horse and rider fully portray the moment before the enemy bullet cut short this illustrious life.” However, above all else, Paulding designed the statue essentially as a portrait statue. “The likeness of General McPherson is excellently reproduced in bronze and is completely authentic even to clothes and accoutrement.” Finally, in order to fulfill the sculptor’s vision for the memorial, “the rider is looking south. . . . Directly behind him are the embattlements of his forces mounted by two huge cannon donated by the United States Government, and behind this fly the Stars and Stripes from a flag pole erected by the city. The entire picture splendidly carries out the idea of ‘The Reconnoisance’ [sic].” The two cannons remained in Central Park until World War II, when they were donated as scrap metal to the war effort. As described in the Official Souvenir, the town’s citizens appeared to be quite pleased with the finished product. 37

37. “The Reconnoisance,” Official Souvenir, [8]. The McPherson memorial’s horse has all four of its hooves on the ground, contradicting the common belief that the horse’s hooves indicate the fate of the rider. Popular belief contends that if the horse’s hooves are off the ground, it signifies that the rider was killed in combat. For further discussion of this myth, see “Statue of Limitations,” Snopes.com, http://www.snopes.com/military/statue.asp. Information on the history of the cannons was acquired through personal communication with David Nigh, president of the McPherson County Historical Society.
The sculptor of the McPherson statue, John Paulding, did not attend the unveiling ceremony for health reasons, but he still left his mark on the event. The monument association made sure to honor the sculptor with a lengthy biographical profile in the *Official Souvenir*. The piece, an article previously published in the *Kansas City Star*, discussed not only Paulding’s work on the McPherson memorial but also his personal history. The article proudly noted that Paulding was an artist who was “rapidly mounting the ladder of fame in the art world.” In 1917, Paulding was a member of the Chicago Society of Artists and the Western Society of Sculptors and was an “alumnus of the Chicago Art Institute.” The unnamed author also suggested that it was fortuitous that, like General McPherson, Paulding was originally from Ohio, approximately 100 miles from McPherson’s birthplace.

McPherson’s residents appear to have been interested in the background of the man who would build their statue, and they desired to honor the creator of their newly prized memorial.

The decision to commission Paulding with the construction of the McPherson memorial was mutually beneficial to both the town and the artist. The monument association was able to reduce the original estimated cost of $30,000 by half, thus saving the town a significant amount of money. For Paulding, a relatively unknown artist, the McPherson memorial offered an opportunity to increase his reputation. In fact, Paulding later became well known for sculpting World War I memorials. His most famous sculpture, a rendition of the “American Doughboy,” was replicated at least fifty times across the United States, including three versions in Kansas at Onaga, Olathe, and Leavenworth. Although E. M. Viquesney has also been credited with creating the first “American Doughboy” and is situated in the midst of a territory [in] which there is an abundant supply of 99% pure water from deep wells and is situated in the midst of a territory [in] which there is no better farming land in the United States.”

Although the commemoration of the memorial would be completely altered by the situation of the United States in 1917, it still managed to maintain its original purpose of promoting civic pride and attempting to convince outsiders of the attractiveness of McPherson. The *Official Souvenir* not only spoke of the memorial itself but also advertised the positive aspects of the town. The *Souvenir* described McPherson as “a beautiful and prosperous city. . . . It has an abundant supply of 99% pure water from deep wells and is situated in the midst of a territory [in] which there is no better farming land in the United States.”

Like the McPherson memorial, Paulding’s “Doughboys” were made with cast bronze, which he believed made them far superior to Viquesney’s pressed copper. Despite the fact that Paulding’s fame eventually came from memorializing World War I soldiers, his start can be traced directly to his commission to build the McPherson memorial.

Although not in attendance, Paulding sent his regards to the citizens of McPherson and explained his own views on the significance of the memorial. In a letter written to the president of the monument association, Van Nordstrand, Paulding wrote, “I tell you it gives me quite a heart ache not to be with you. . . . My sincerest hope is that the bronze General and his Horse shall grow in your pleasure and as the generations follow they shall come to know them as the emblem of courage and patriotism.”

Paulding’s words reveal that, in fact, even the sculptor understood that his work represented more than simply honoring a Civil War general or enhancing the image of a Kansas town. In light of the United States’ situation and involvement in World War I, Paulding also recognized the importance of collective service to the country, writing that “the attentive attitudes of the horse and rider shall often remind [future generations] of that necessary vigilance toward the interests of the whole community which it has been well said is the price of our liberty.”

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The *Souvenir* also contained pictures of homes, businesses, churches, and parks in McPherson. The authors of the program intended the unveiling ceremony to provide an opportunity to convince people to settle in McPherson.

The town advertised the event throughout the state in the hope that thousands of potential residents would attend. Men from McPherson traveled to nearby towns to promote the unveiling ceremony and distribute circulars. In Salina, Kansas, the local paper reported that these events

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McPherson men claimed that “there will be something doing from daylight until 11 o’clock at night.” The article further stated that “thousands of people from all over the state will start out on the morning of the Fourth with McPherson as the mecca.” 42 Several town newspapers throughout Kansas either advertised or reported on the McPherson memorial. The Topeka Daily Capital advertised the ceremony, claiming, “It will be not only a county-wide event, but a Kansas and almost a nation-wide event when an equestrian bronze statue, the first of its kind in Kansas, is unveiled here on July 4 to the memory of Maj. Gen. James Birdseye McPherson.” The article included a large picture of the monument and promoted the expected scale of the planned ceremony. “Indications from every section of the state indicate that it will be one of the largest attended observances of July the Fourth ever held in the state. Special trains will be run from Topeka, Pratt, Great Bend, Florence, Salina and El Dorado and the city may be reached either over the Meridian or Santa Fe trails.” 43 The widespread promotion of the unveiling ceremony shows that McPherson residents worked hard to advertise their event to a broad audience in an effort to attract as many people as possible to the celebration.

Part of the attraction for attendees of the unveiling ceremony, beyond the demonstration of patriotism and the honoring of General McPherson, was to see a prominent general, Nelson A. Miles, deliver the dedication speech. Miles’s military record included distinguished service during the Civil War, in which he had impressively risen to the rank of major general at the age of twenty-six. However, he had become most notable as an Indian fighter following the Civil War, gaining renown during the Great Sioux War and the Apache Wars. Most recently, he had served as the commanding general of the U.S. Army during the Spanish-American War. 44 Most Americans would have known Miles and been drawn by the opportunity to hear him speak. In fact, many of the statewide articles that promoted the unveiling ceremony focused more on General Miles than on General McPherson. The Salina Daily Union reported that General Miles would be coming to McPherson to dedicate the memorial. Indeed, a picture of the monument and promoted the expected scale of the planned ceremony. “Indications from every section of the state indicate that it will be one of the largest attended observances of July the Fourth ever held in the state. Special trains will be run from Topeka, Pratt, Great Bend, Florence, Salina and El Dorado and the city may be reached either over the Meridian or Santa Fe trails.” 43 The widespread promotion of the unveiling ceremony shows that McPherson residents worked hard to advertise their event to a broad audience in an effort to attract as many people as possible to the celebration.

The unveiling ceremony turned out to be a major success—particularly for the residents’ goal of promoting the attractiveness of the town. One example of how such large numbers of Kansans managed to travel to McPherson was demonstrated by the residents of Salina, Kansas. More than 1,000 Salina residents attended the commemoration. The crowd could travel to McPherson a number of different ways. Many simply drove their automobiles to McPherson. As a second option, the day prior to the event, the Salina Daily Union announced that “a special train on the Union Pacific leaves Salina tomorrow morning at 7:10 [a.m.] o’clock and returns from McPherson at 11:30 [p.m.]. In addition the regular trains run.” The Salina residents in attendance were noticeably impressed by McPherson’s hospitality. The Daily Union reported that “there was the best of order and unbounded felicity prevailed throughout the entire day.” The article continued, “As an indication of McPherson’s great hospitality many of the best homes of the city were opened to the visitors and placards bid welcome to the porches of these homes for the rest and comfort of all.

43. “Monument to Gen. J. B. McPherson to Be Unveiled July the Fourth,” Topeka Daily Capital, June 24, 1917, 2B. In addition to the Daily Capital, Kansas newspapers outside McPherson that advertised or reported the unveiling included the Salina Daily Union, the Wichita Sunday Eagle, and the Kansas City Star.
44. For biographies of Miles, see Robert Wooster, Nelson A. Miles and the Twilight of the Frontier Army (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993); and Peter R. DeMontravel, A Hero to His Fighting Men: Nelson A. Miles, 1839–1925 (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1998).

45. “Stood Few Feet Away,” Salina Daily Union, June 30, 1917. Estimates of the crowd varied. The Kansas City Star of July 13, 1917, refers to “fully thirty thousand persons” in the article “The Kansas City Star Representative Describes McPherson Celebration.” The Wichita (Kansas) Daily Eagle of July 5, 1917, placed the number at over 40,000. McPherson’s Democrat-Opinion of July 6, 1917, quoted “competent judges” who placed the number between 30,000 and 45,000. The original hope that the unveiling ceremony could provide a platform for boosting the town certainly came to fruition. However, in the process, the concentration on General McPherson appeared to be slowly losing its position as the central focal point.
Chairs were [set] out on the porches for visitors. As Salina’s newspaper made evident, McPherson not only successfully attracted attendees from across the state but also achieved one of its primary objectives of promoting the attractiveness of the town.

The town planned the unveiling ceremony as a daylong event. The program specifically referred to the commemoration as a “patriotic and military event.” The residents recognized the fact that the United States had recently entered the European war. The monument association asserted that because the United States was at war, “it is appropriate that this unveiling should be a day of great patriotic effort and for that reason the event will participate of deep patriotism and military splendor.” The day began with the sunrise firing of Topeka’s Battery A, followed by the ringing of every bell in the city forty-eight times in honor of each state in the Union. Every steam whistle in the city also blew for three straight minutes. A military escort, a band, and a reception committee greeted the special guests as they arrived at the train station. A parade passed in review of General Miles. Following the orations of General Miles and the official dedication of the memorial, there occurred more band music, more patriotic speeches, and a drill exercise of state troops. The night ended with a pageant. The day of patriotic celebration exemplified the mood of a country in the process of mobilizing for war.

General Miles’s dedication speech best represented the connection made between the memorial’s unveiling and patriotic duty and service to the United States. It also reflects another shift that occurred by focusing less on General McPherson and Civil War veterans. “On this our National Birthday, a day sacred and glorious to all lovers of liberty in every quarter of the globe,” began Miles, we are gathered, not only to pay our tribute of honor to the heroes and patriots who have given the full measure of their valor and sacrifice to our beloved country, but we come to pledge anew our fidelity to the welfare and perpetuity of [our] system of Government and power.

General James Birdseye McPherson spoke to the crowd. The Wichita Eagle reported that following General Miles’s official unveiling of the statue, an old man walked onto the speaker’s stand. A. W. Smith of Topeka introduced Dr. Heddinger, a ninety-six-year-old veteran. Smith said that Germany had expelled Dr. Heddinger “for rebelling against the beginning of the present German despotism,” following which “he came to this country and fought in our Civil war.” Heddinger’s words visibly moved the crowd when, in a barely audible voice, he stated, “I fought against German despotism of that day. Were I fifty years younger I would enlist today.” The Eagle reported that following this statement, “General Miles stepped forward and grasped his hand. Then the crowd, massed about the stand, cheered wildly.”

The Topeka Daily Capital, which also reported on this scene, wrote, “Hundreds of settlers of German birth or parentage from the southern part of McPherson county burst into applause with the rest of the crowd, testifying to the unanimity of Kansas patriotism.”

The incident merits recognition for two reasons: first, it represents an example of a Civil War veteran being recognized and honored for his service to the United States; second, and more important, it demonstrates that the unveiling ceremony served as a recruitment tool for the United States’ fight against Germany during World War I. Once again the attention continued to shift away from General McPherson. In a sense, McPherson was still being forgotten despite the fact that he was being honored with a memorial.

Despite efforts to maintain a focus on General McPherson, the attempt was overshadowed by patriotic rhetoric and an emphasis on military service. The same McPherson Weekly Republican article that provided a biographical sketch of McPherson quickly turned to promoting the unveiling of the bronze statue and the corresponding tablet. The article stated, “When the monument was planned this tablet was not thought of but as the work progressed those in charge of it felt that it would be incomplete without recognizing the [valiant] soldiers who made it possible for generals to win laurels. McPherson county has always been a highly patriotic county.”

Another fascinating event took place during the unveiling ceremony when a German Civil War veteran


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Even in an article devoted directly to General McPherson, the author expressed the reasons


behind unifying the image of McPherson with the patriotic sacrifice and service of all veterans. At the same time, the author attempted to portray the town as a particularly patriotic community, thus maintaining the original goal of promoting civic pride.

The *Official Souvenir* also included a biographical piece on McPherson, albeit an extremely romanticized one. It challenged any assertion that McPherson had foolishly exposed himself to the enemy, claiming, “[McPherson] was a man who feared no danger and shirked no responsibility, but he was never fool-hardy nor rash.” The piece described McPherson’s personal appearance as “eminently prepossessing. He was six feet high, of remarkable physical development, graceful carriage and pleasing manners. He blended in the most happy manner ‘the grace and gentleness of the friend with the dignity, courage, faith and manliness of the soldier.’” In addition, this piece included much of General William T. Sherman’s speech from a previous dedication of a memorial to McPherson in his hometown of Clyde, Ohio, in 1881. Sherman not only recounted his relationship with the general but also provided an account of his character. Sherman described McPherson’s desire to be more than simply a staff officer. He declared, “[McPherson’s] natural place was as a leader of men, the highest sphere in military life,” which he quickly attained, and soon “he performed deeds which are fully recorded, and place his name honorably and worthily in the catalogue of the great generals of the world.” Sherman emphasized the importance of the Civil War, noting that “the years 1863 and 1864 were big with events which will influence the destiny of America for centuries to come.” Sherman ended his speech by stating somberly that “like a brilliant meteor, ‘Loved of the Gods,’ his young life went out before we had achieved the full measure of the work demanded of us by the times.” Many people who read the published remarks of the late General Sherman believed that they too were engaged in a struggle that would “influence the destiny of America” and that there was still “work demanded of” Americans.

As time passed and the memory of the unveiling faded, the town’s image of General McPherson remained closely linked with veterans’ collective sacrifice. In 1964, on the hundredth anniversary of General McPherson’s death, the *McPherson Sentinel* published an editorial titled “Lest We Forget Our War Heroes Too Soon.” The unnamed author began by recognizing the occasion for which he was writing, noting that 100 years before, McPherson had fallen on the battlefield. The focus of the editorial quickly changed, however, with the statement that “when the men who survived a war came home, they were given the hero’s welcomes they so richly deserved. But once a war was over, how often did you think of these men who had the courage to fight for their country?” The editorial’s attention thus shifted from honoring McPherson to encouraging readers to recognize the sacrifices made by all American servicemen. “It is good to think of these men once in awhile between wars,” continued the author.

It is also good to think of the thousands of our best young men today in the armed forces. Men ready to fight to the limit when needed. Men such as these are the keepers of the peace between nations. . . . The best things in life must be fought for one way or another. Once won, we again must be ready to fight to hold our possessions and privileges we prize so highly. Only our fighting men can protect us as we sit helpless in our happy homes. Without their courage our nation would have disappeared long ago.

At the time of the editorial, American servicemen were fighting and dying in Indochina, and although the nation did not consider itself at war in 1964, the looming Vietnam conflict appears to have been on the author’s mind. Even if the author was not specifically referring to what would become the Vietnam War, the article was published during the height of the Cold War, and the ongoing struggle against the Soviet Union in particular and communism in general certainly occupied many Americans’ thoughts. As in 1917, the country in 1964 had a reason to connect General McPherson with the idea of patriotic service. In this context, it becomes clear why, other than the brief mention of General McPherson’s death, the entire editorial concentrated on patriotic recognition of soldiers’ service to their country. The editorial demonstrates that the memory of McPherson remained during the 1960s, as it had at the time of the unveiling of the memorial, strongly associated with themes of patriotism and the recognition of veterans.

Another excellent example of the relationship between the McPherson memorial and other tributes to veterans

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can be seen by the transformation of the park in which the statue was dedicated. In 1917, the park in which the town placed the McPherson memorial was called simply Central Park. Only one year earlier, a different local park had received the name McPherson Park.55 Surprisingly, the park with the equestrian statue failed to receive the name for the individual to whom the memorial was built and the town was named. Although the name may appear to be a trivial matter, it reveals a great deal about what the park and the memorial represented to the town’s residents. Had the memorial been solely about recognizing the life of General McPherson, it would follow that the town would have named the park after the general. Instead, after the unveiling of the McPherson statue, the park became a central site of additional memorialization. From the end of World War I to as recently as 2004, the town performed a series of memorial dedications. The first memorial, erected shortly after the end of World War I, was a granite memorial to Company D of the Second Kansas Infantry. The stone was engraved with “1917–1919: In Grateful Tribute to the Supreme Sacrifice of Our Comrades.” After the Vietnam War, another impressive memorial was constructed—a triangular monument called the “McPherson County Memorial.” Each of the three sides of this memorial is devoted to different wars—one side to World War I, another to World War II, and the third to Korea and Vietnam—with the names of McPherson County residents who died in these conflicts. On Veteran’s Day in 1990, the town rededicated the park as Memorial Park. On July 4, 2001, the town named the park’s pathway the “Military Order of the Purple Heart Pathway.” Most recently, on Veterans’ Day in 2004, the town erected a memorial to “Prisoners of War” and those “Missing in Action.” Although the McPherson memorial remains the park’s most prominent monument, the accompanying memorials have served to reinforce the idea that the McPherson equestrian statue honors much more than a Civil War general. In the years since the statue’s unveiling, the transformation of the park into a symbol of patriotic memorialization perfectly embodied the additional layers of meaning that the McPherson memorial came to represent. What began as a demonstration of civic pride and an honoring of General McPherson slowly transformed into recognizing all Civil War veterans until the memorial finally came to represent a patriotic observance of military service and an honoring of the collective sacrifice of all servicemen. Memorial Park, as it exists today, exemplifies the present meaning of the McPherson memorial.

Over time, even as the park’s meaning changed, some residents of McPherson attempted to recover the general’s memory. Of particular note were the members of the McPherson County Historical Society, who under the guidance of President Linn Peterson desired to learn more about McPherson. In 1989, the society invited a local professor from McPherson College, the late Dr. Leland Lengel, to deliver a presentation on the life and military career of General McPherson. Working primarily from Elizabeth J. Whaley’s biography, Lengel offered the members of the society a concise yet informative description of the general’s military service.56 Lengel’s presentation increased the interest of many members of the society. In 1992, it organized a trip to visit Clyde, Ohio, the site of General McPherson’s birthplace and his final resting place. In addition to the obvious historical connection between the two towns, Clyde was also one of the few communities to have a McPherson memorial.57 This fact added significance to the trip and allowed McPherson residents to compare their own statue with that of another town. Overall, the trip served not only to fulfill the desire of many McPherson residents to learn more about their town’s namesake but also to give further meaning to their own memorial and the man to whom it was dedicated.

“A life can easily be forgotten,” wrote Thomas Waldsmith. “Time fades all memories no matter how bright and visible a light is reflected on its subject.”58 In the case of James B. McPherson, the light has not been particularly bright. The fact that very few historians have studied his military career has ensured that over the past century, the memory of General McPherson has diminished.

55. Flory, McPherson at Fifty, 98.
56. Leland L. Lengel, “General James Birdseye McPherson,” February 4, 1989, McPherson County Historical Society, sound recording, program 144, compact disc, McPherson Public Library, McPherson, Kansas. Linn Peterson, president of the McPherson County Historical Society, archived audio recordings of various society meetings, which have since been converted to compact discs and made available to the public through the McPherson Public Library.
57. Linn A. Peterson, “Clyde, Ohio Trip,” August 25, 1992, McPherson County Historical Society, sound recording, program 175, compact disc, McPherson Public Library, McPherson, Kansas. Clyde, Ohio, has a large cannon monument erected at the site of McPherson’s death; and Washington, D.C., has a bronze equestrian statue located in McPherson Square. McPherson’s bronze equestrian statue is unique primarily because it is the only site that McPherson never physically visited during his lifetime.
Yet even beyond the historical record, the memory of McPherson has continued to fade. One site where a group of individuals endeavored to maintain the memory of the general was the town of McPherson, Kansas. However, even in this particular case, in which a town was named after the general and an equestrian statue was constructed in his honor, McPherson the man was still largely forgotten within the context of memorialization.

Certainly there existed other motives and additional meaning behind the memorial’s commemoration. The project resulted specifically from civic pride and boosterism in a budding town hoping to increase its importance. The unveiling ceremony ultimately became a platform to attract new residents and to advertise the opportunities that the community offered. Yet with the association’s decision to include the Tablet of Fame, the memorial quickly took on an additional layer of meaning by honoring the county’s past Civil War veterans. What started as a demonstration of civic pride and boosterism evolved further as a result of unforeseen events and the arrival of World War I. The atmosphere surrounding the United States’ mobilization for World War I cannot be ignored because it dominated the event that took place in 1917. The timing of the unveiling ultimately led to the shift from honoring McPherson and Civil War veterans to promoting America’s patriotic cause and encouraging military service. Thus, the memorial’s eventual meaning expanded to honor the service of all U.S. veterans, as evidenced by the transformation of Memorial Park.

The case of the McPherson memorial also illuminates larger issues related to history and memory. It demonstrates that a collective memory—in this case that of a small Kansas town—is created in order to give meaning to those individuals preserving the memory. Although the decision to build the memorial involved honoring the individual for whom the town was named, events surrounding the unveiling of the statue soon changed the original objective and gave added layers of meaning to the memorial. Over the subsequent decades, the McPherson memorial, situated in Memorial Park, remained an icon of the themes of patriotism it originally symbolized at the time of its unveiling.

The account of the McPherson memorial reveals as much about a story of collective forgetting as it does about one group’s attempt to remember through memorialization. Although the original intent of the memorial was to preserve the memory of the general, by altering the significance of the memorial to reflect the time in which it was dedicated, the town’s residents unintentionally downplayed the significance of the life of the individual being honored. In fact, this particular case study sheds light on the greater subject of memorialization—representing the fact that through commemoration, individuals are often overlooked or forgotten in the process of connecting them with larger themes such as patriotism. Indeed, in one sense the town genuinely attempted to remember General McPherson and honor his memory with a lasting monument. In part, it accomplished this goal, but in the process it also added to the further forgetting of General McPherson by altering the meaning of his memorial. Studying the McPherson memorial illuminates many key themes, including civic pride and boosterism, collective memory, and commemoration. Ultimately, the case reveals how one town’s efforts to maintain the memory of a single individual became overshadowed by additional layers of meaning through the process of memorialization.