

# The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic

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## Review

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**Gannon, Barbara A.** *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8078-3452-7

### Race Relations and the Grand Army of the Republic

Barbara A. Gannon, assistant professor of military history at the University of Central Florida, makes a significant contribution to the literature on Civil War memory and the Union veterans who were active in their postwar veterans' organization, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). Gannon challenges existing scholarship by arguing that the GAR was, for the most part, a racially inclusive organization in which whites accepted black veterans as comrades whose contributions and sacrifices earned them equal status within the organization. Moreover, while previous historians have asserted that white GAR members defined their cause mainly as the preservation of the Union, Gannon demonstrates that many white members saw emancipation as an equally meaningful outcome of the war.

Gannon's arguments are based on extensive archival research in GAR records from numerous state and local historical societies, along with scores of published proceedings from meetings, conventions, and encampments of the GAR and its auxiliaries. Census records, newspapers, memoirs, histories, and many other relevant primary and secondary sources attest to the years of travel, reading, compilation, and careful analysis that inform this volume.

The book is organized in two sections. The first documents African Americans' participation in the GAR and makes the case for the organization's racial inclusiveness. The second assesses the nature of black and white veterans' interactions as comrades who shared a sense of common cause and common sacrifice. In addition, Gannon provides two very useful appendices listing the names, numbers, and locations of all African American GAR posts and all

integrated GAR posts the author was able to identify in her research.

Previous scholars have generally depicted the GAR as an organization typical of its time: one that discriminated against African Americans by frequently denying blacks membership in white posts and marginalizing the separate African-American posts. Gannon's examination of GAR posts and members at national, state, and local levels suggests that the slights blacks experienced in the GAR were the exception rather than the rule. Efforts to exclude blacks from membership or to deny black members equal rights within the GAR generated considerable controversy. While racially restrictive practices were sometimes allowed to stand, more often than not African Americans' equal status in the GAR was upheld.

African Americans usually formed their own separate GAR posts in communities with sizable black populations, even though they were rarely barred from white posts. White and black posts operated similarly, but African-American posts were more likely to benefit from active women's auxiliaries that expanded the posts' connections with social and charitable activities in the broader African-American community. Given the low economic status and low literacy rates among African Americans, women helped the post perform its internal functions more effectively, while also spearheading relief efforts in the black community.

Whether in segregated or integrated posts, African-American participation in the GAR incorporated black veterans' contributions and sacrifices into the public memory of the Civil War. Black veterans took part in Memorial Day ceremonies, marched at GAR encampments, organized Emancipation celebrations, and regularly used public spaces to physically represent their part in the nation's deliverance. During the postwar generation, Civil War memory was increasingly dominated by a narrative of white sectional reconciliation that emphasized the honor in both northern and southern causes. Slavery as a cause of the war slipped ever further from white Americans' understandings. Gannon convincingly demonstrates that black and white GAR members largely rejected the dominant narrative. Unlike most of the nation, GAR members spurned the notion of a noble Confederate cause and maintained a conscious recognition of slavery's place at the heart of the national conflict. White GAR men often bristled at the Blue-Gray reunions that received so much publicity by the century's end. They dismissed any honor in the Confederate cause, and the GAR remained unlike any other national organization in its racial inclusivity and

recognition of African Americans' role in preserving the Union and eradicating slavery. These positions, so out of step with the national trend, were rooted in the individual memories of veterans who had fought alongside one another during a war for Liberty and Union, and who retained that sense of comradeship for the rest of their lives.

Unfortunately, the GAR's racial inclusivity and sense of a shared past did not alter the trajectory of the nation's collective memory or its racial policies. As Gannon points out, white GAR men "rejected reunionism and remembered slavery, but neither their personal memories nor their collective Memory prompted these men to protect African American rights at the turn of the century" (164). For these men, fighting to end slavery did not translate into a desire for racial equality in postwar America. Gannon proposes that the coexistence of emancipation and racism among white GAR members relates, in part, to America's increasing international expansionism. The centrality of emancipation in the Civil War did not extend into the concept of full freedom for black Americans; rather, it bolstered an imperialist vision of the United States extending freedom abroad through the Spanish-American War and later the World Wars of the twentieth century. The United States remained, for them and their descendants, a beacon of liberty for the world, but not for African American citizens at home.

Much of Gannon's argument is persuasive. She effectively complicates David Blight's assertion that amnesia about slavery and emancipation made possible white reconciliation and national progress; in fact, the nation also had to forget secession and treason. White GAR men remembered both, yet they had little difficulty compartmentalizing their fight for Liberty and Union and their comradeship with black veterans from the realities of Jim Crow America. While Gannon makes a strong case for the GAR's commitment to the inclusion of black comrades, she may overstate the level of equality blacks experienced in the GAR. African Americans did hold organizational offices, but these were often stations like chaplain, Council of Administration member, and others that carried little authority and did not place blacks in command of whites. This suggests tokenism rather than true equality, akin to the era's Republican presidents' standard appointments of blacks as Recorder of Deeds or U.S. Marshal in the Federal District. And blacks' desire to form separate posts suggests that they desired a greater degree of solidarity and control than they found in integrated posts.

Gannon's final chapter examining African-American collective memory and uses of the past in the first decades of the twentieth century is problematic because her focus is too narrow. Gannon argues that black Americans gave up their efforts to spread their version of Civil War memory to the nation, since it could play little role in the current struggle for equal rights. She makes much of the publicity earned by the 1913 Gettysburg reunion, while arguing that African Americans barely commented on any Civil War commemorations, including the semicentennial of the storming of Fort Wagner by the 54th Massachusetts.

Gannon errs here in two ways. First, mainstream newspapers' coverage of the Gettysburg reunion was not as extensive as Gannon suggests. While Gettysburg received considerable attention for a short time, it quickly faded from headlines, as did both blacks' and whites' attention to the Civil War. More importantly, black spokespersons in fact continued unabated in their efforts to challenge racially exclusive versions of the nation's past. African-American newspapers may have given scant coverage to the Gettysburg and Wagner anniversaries, but black activists utilized many other tools to forge a racially conscious collective memory within black communities and (less successfully) in the nation at large. They looked not only to the Civil War, but to black revolutionary heroes, slave rebels, abolitionists, activists, and statesmen, along with the contemporary black soldiers in America's new foreign wars. African Americans held massive expositions in Philadelphia, Richmond, Chicago, New York, and elsewhere, celebrating the semicentennial of Emancipation between 1913 and 1915. These were covered extensively in both black and mainstream newspapers. The speeches, parades, historical pageants, and displays at these events were largely focused on demonstrating the race's progress since emancipation. But the historical component was also front and center, crafting a collective memory that would instill race pride, a sense of history, and a renewed commitment to the fight for racial equality.

My disagreement with some of Gannon's conclusions should not diminish the overall quality and significance of this volume. While it does not completely displace previous works on the GAR, it does much to refine our understanding the importance of the organization's racially inclusive policies and practices during a period when virtually every other aspect of American society was engaged in solidifying Jim Crow. The book is a welcome addition to the literature on the Civil War, its veterans, and its collective memory in American society between the 1860s and 1920s.

*Mitch Kachun is Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the History department at Western Michigan University. He is the author of Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915 (Massachusetts, 2003) and is currently working on a book tentatively titled First Martyr of Liberty: Crispus Attucks in American Memory.*