

A MASTERPIECE OF MISINTERPRETATION
The Atlanta Cyclorama's Journey from Public History to Propaganda (and Back Again)
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In the wake of the June 2015 white supremacist mass shooting at Charleston's "Mother Emanuel" AME Church, the decades-long debate surrounding Civil War iconography greatly intensified. While this has led to a variety of changes in symbolic representations honoring the Confederacy, it has been reported that of the over 1,800 cataloged examples of Confederate iconography in public spaces, approximately 1,740 remain in an active status.¹ While some changes have struck a recontextualizing middle ground that seeks to temper Confederate nostalgia with historical accuracy, most petitions for alterations have played out within an "all or nothing" binary where they have either been taken down in totality or remain wholly unaltered in bureaucratically-protected perpetuity.

Standing in contrast to these disparate poles is the Atlanta Cyclorama, an impressive feat of artistic achievement that has maintained a complexly fluid existence as both a pro-Union attraction of public history and a pro-Confederate artifact of propaganda. Debuting in 1886 in Minneapolis, MN and currently on display at the Atlanta History Center in Atlanta, GA, this colossal oil painting stands 49 feet tall, stretches 371 feet long, and weighs almost 10,000 pounds. Built to be experienced in an enveloping, 360-degree spectacle, the panoramic painting depicts the Battle of Atlanta, a decisive Union victory fought on July 22, 1864 that contributed mightily to Abraham Lincoln's re-election and the eventual fall of the Confederacy.

What makes the Atlanta Cyclorama so historically significant is its two interwoven narrative threads, one of existence and the other of evolution. First, the panoramic painting itself – one of only two of its kind on display in the U. S. – is a truly awe-inspiring artistic statement

¹ Booth Gunter and Jamie Kizzire, "Whose Heritage?: Public Symbols of the Confederacy," Southern Poverty Law Center, June 4, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/20180604/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy>.

that embodies an antiquated entertainment medium. Second, as the painting traveled south, its meanings were shifted in surprising ways as its canvas and its messaging were intentionally altered to stir Southern sympathies and promote the false narratives of Lost Cause mythology. As *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* writer Jim Auchmutey describes its southern trek, “new audiences flipped its meaning, bastardizing the spectacle into a curio of Confederate identity and... white Southern pride. For decades, it was a masterpiece of misinterpretation.”²

To best understand the conflicting meanings ascribed to the Atlanta Cyclorama across its almost century-and-a-half existence, it is important to detail the battle emblazoned across its massive canvas. In mid-1864, Union Major General William Tecumseh Sherman initiated the Atlanta Campaign, as the city was a major railroad hub and strategic Confederate supply chain center. After fighting a few months, Sherman had outmaneuvered the cautious Confederate general Joseph E. Johnston for 110 miles of land gains, prompting Confederacy president Jefferson Davis to replace him with the more aggressive Lieutenant General John Bell Hood. The Battle of Atlanta took place just four days into Hood’s tenure and his war hawk nature led him to strike first and suffer a staggering defeat. As James McPherson writes, Sherman’s forces “inflicted half as many casualties on Hood’s army in one afternoon as it had suffered in ten weeks under Johnston.”³ After the victory, Sherman gained control of the city by September and completed his scorched earth “March to the Sea” by the end of the year.

The Battle of Atlanta was not just a vital military victory for the Union, it was also a major turning point for northern confidence in Lincoln. Prior to The Battle of Atlanta, Lincoln’s re-election prospects were waning tremendously due to the ongoing war. However, after

² Jim Auchmutey, “Redeeming the Cyclorama: Why the Century-Old Attraction is Anything But a Monument to the Confederacy,” *Atlanta Magazine*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.atlantamagazine.com/great-reads/redeeming-the-cyclorama-why-the-century-old-attraction-is-anything-but-a-monument-to-the-confederacy/>.

³ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, (Oxford: New York, 1988), 754.

Sherman's capture of Atlanta and his destruction of Confederate supply lines throughout Georgia, the election turned out to be an easy win for Lincoln. By April of the following year, Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant in Appomattox, Virginia and the war was over. However, the fight to decide who would control the narrative of the war, the motivations of its participants, and the perspective of its meanings had just begun.

In the post-war cultural landscape of the late 19th century, cyclorama paintings were one of the most popular forms of entertainment and many cities had circular buildings constructed specifically to house them. According to the Atlanta History Center, at least 40 known cyclorama paintings toured the U.S. from 1873 to 1898, 25 of which were Civil War battles.⁴ While some of these traveling cycloramas depicted such non-military tableaux as *The Great Chicago Fire*, *Jerusalem on the Day of the Crucifixion*, and *Niagara Falls*, over half of the cycloramas were devoted to 10 separate Civil War battles, including 12 copies of *The Battle of Gettysburg* alone.

The Battle of Atlanta cyclorama painting has its beginnings in mid-1880s Milwaukee, Wisconsin with the American Panorama Company. In late 1885, only 21 years after the actual battle they were looking to capture on canvas, members of the APC traveled from Milwaukee to Atlanta to do field research at the battle site. They were assisted by Civil War veterans who had fought that day, as well as by Theodore Davis, a *Harper's Weekly* illustrator who had traveled with Sherman's troops.⁵ Once the team determined a fixed focal point for the battle, they constructed a 40-foot tower from which to study the land and start drafting their ideas. After returning to Milwaukee, they worked on the enormous painting for five months. The completed canvas ended up being 49 feet high by 382 feet long and it weighed over 9,000 pounds when it

⁴ Wall plaque, *Cyclorama: The Big Picture*, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA.

⁵ Stephen Davis, "Cyclorama," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, July 24, 2019, <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/cyclorama>.

premiered in Minneapolis, Minnesota on June 29, 1886.⁶ A second copy of *The Battle of Atlanta* premiered in Detroit the following February, but its current whereabouts cannot be verified, as it was last reported to be seen in Baltimore in 1899.⁷

Just shy of two years after its unveiling in Minneapolis, the painting traveled to Indianapolis and stayed for another two years until its owner went bankrupt.⁸ Seeing an investment opportunity in the gargantuan work of art, entrepreneurial showman Paul Atkinson purchased it, but he felt it could be far more lucrative if he repainted a few things and took it down south. After all, *The Battle of Atlanta* had been painted specifically for northern audiences – a point driven home by the fact that not only was it capturing a significant Union victory, but also that of the over 6,000 soldiers displayed across its canvas, there are over 20 identifiable Union officers and not a single identifiable Confederate officer.

Here, it is important to note that the American Panorama Company painted *The Battle of Atlanta* as a realistic public history piece, accurately presenting *The Battle of Atlanta* for what it was – a decisive Union victory. However, in their attempts to artistically capture the battle at its most dramatic point, they chose a distinct moment – reported as being 4:45pm – when the battle’s outcome had not yet been decided. At that precise tipping point, Confederate troops had just broken through a Union artillery line near a large brick building known as Troup Hurt House. While those Confederate troops would end up being pushed back by Union General John “Black Jack” Logan, the artists chose to paint the moment of Logan *on his way* to delivering the counterattack. For them, painting Logan heading over to the action was a method of establishing artistic tension. For Atkinson, and most southerners who would visit *The Battle of Atlanta*, that

⁶ Daniel Judt, “Cyclorama: An Atlanta Monument,” *Southern Cultures*, Volume 23, Number 2, Summer 2017, 23.

⁷ “Timeline of *The Battle of Atlanta* cyclorama painting,” Atlanta History Center, <https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/assets/documents/Timeline-of-Battle-of-Atlanta-Cyclorama-Painting.pdf>.

⁸ “Timeline of *The Battle of Atlanta* cyclorama painting”.

“not quite there yet” window left the painting open to interpretation and made it easier to incorporate intentional falsifications onto its canvas and into its narrative.

While Atkinson’s brothers were southern soldiers, his altering of the painting was driven more by his love of commerce than the Confederacy. In a letter to a friend, Atkinson wrote of the painting’s pro-Union messaging, “This is all right to the son of a federal soldier... But it don’t sit so well with the son of a Confederate.”⁹ One particular scene that Atkinson altered featured Confederate prisoners being marched by a Union officer holding a captured Confederate flag. Atkinson painted over the Confederate uniforms with Union blue, transforming the southern POWs into cowardly northern deserters. He also removed the captured Confederate flag, adding in “a few tattered American flags... lying in the dust”¹⁰ and “ground into the mud.”¹¹

Atkinson debuted his freshly falsified acquisition in Chattanooga in 1891 and took it to Atlanta the following year. Between his aesthetic changes to the canvas and his propaganda spin in the papers, the painting – which depicted a real battle that the Union had won only 27 years prior – was promoted to southern audiences as “The Only Confederate Victory Ever Painted.”¹² After Atkinson made the quick money on the painting’s Confederate facelift, it was purchased and moved from its dilapidated Edgewood Avenue building a couple miles south to Grant Park.

After being on display in Atlanta for about six years, attendance started decreasing and both the painting and the building were falling into disrepair. In March of 1898, private owner George V. Gress donated the painting to the city of Atlanta with the stipulation that they would

⁹ Daniel Judt, “Atlanta’s Civil War Monument, Minus the Pro-Confederate Bunkum,” *The Atlantic*, March 17, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/03/how-atlanta-cyclorama-lost-its-confederate-overtone/584938/>.

¹⁰ Judt, “Atlanta’s Civil War Monument, Minus the Pro-Confederate Bunkum”.

¹¹ Jack Hitt, “Atlanta’s Famed Cyclorama Mural Will Tell The Truth About The Civil War Once Again,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/atlanta-famed-cyclorama-tell-truth-civil-war-once-again-180970715/>.

¹² Wall plaque, *Cyclorama: The Big Picture*, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA.

attend to its necessary repairs. The city freshened up the painting and eventually constructed a sturdier stone building for it on the same Grant Park grounds. This new building would serve as *The Battle of Atlanta*'s home for the next 95 years, a tumultuous timeframe that would see the attraction repeatedly fall in and out of favor with the city's residents and feature three distinctive episodes where Atlanta's mayor would step in to help secure the relic's longevity.

The first such episode occurred under the mayorship of William B. Hartsfield, who first took office in 1937. Just prior to his start, the city of Atlanta received a much-needed Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project grant to restore *The Battle of Atlanta*.¹³ The renovation was overseen by artist Wilbur Kurtz, whose grandiose vision involved making the cyclorama an even more immersive experience by adding a three-dimensional diorama that jutted from the bottom of the canvas and was littered with rising and falling topographical elements, battle-scarred trees, destroyed railroad tracks, and 128 plaster soldiers in action.

While Kurtz restored some of Atkinson's changes back to their original state – most notably repainting the recast Union deserters back to their origins as Confederate POWs – he also added some new artistic features that appealed to the false ideologies of Confederate sympathizers and Lost Cause mythologizers. Some of these changes included adding a voice-over narration that was underscored by “Dixie” (often considered the Confederacy's de facto national anthem) and painting over 15 white-and-red battle flags to reflect the more popular Confederate flag: a red field with blue diagonal bars and 13 white stars.

At the time of Kurtz's restoration project, the infamous Confederate flag was already synonymous with the Lost Cause, a movement that believes the Civil War was “an unjust attack on the Old South, whose culture deserved veneration and whose warriors had fought bravely to

¹³ Daniel Judt, “Cyclorama: An Atlanta Monument,” *Southern Cultures*, Volume 23, Number 2, Summer 2017, 34.

defend their way of life.”¹⁴ For southerners who had seen this flag celebrated in *Birth of a Nation*, flown proudly over the reforming of the KKK, and venerated as the aesthetic touchstone for “Old South” ideologies, its intentional inclusion on *The Battle of Atlanta*’s canvas sent a clear message of acceptance and admiration to Lost Cause mythologizers.

The same year that the newly revamped Atlanta Cyclorama reopened its doors, it partnered with another Atlanta-based pop culture spectacle of Lost Cause mythology: the film adaptation of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with The Wind*. When the film premiered in Atlanta, its stars made a widely publicized visit to the Atlanta Cyclorama. Clark Gable was reported to have commented that the only thing he didn’t like about the Cyclorama was that he wasn’t in it. In short time, Kurtz had one of the plaster soldiers repainted to resemble Rhett Butler, Gable’s character in the film. The unmistakably mustachioed anomaly is still on display today.

The second notable mayoral intervention took place in the early 1970s, during the administration of Atlanta’s first African American mayor, Maynard Jackson. At the time, post-Civil Rights Movement integration fears were driving “white flight” to the suburbs and one of Atlanta’s other Lost Cause shrines received its crowning jewel, as Stone Mountain’s massive 1.5 acre carving of Confederate icons Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and Stonewall Jackson was completed. Calls for the Atlanta Cyclorama to be relocated to Stone Mountain grew fierce in white suburbanite circles, but Jackson had made a federally-funded restoration project one of his signature goals. He once stated, “The Cyclorama depicts the Battle of Atlanta, a battle the right side won. It was a battle that helped to free my ancestors, and I’ll make sure that that depiction is saved.”¹⁵ Jackson’s clear-cut rhetoric calling out the Union victory was the first time that many Atlantans heard the truth about the misinformation of the Atlanta Cyclorama. For decades,

¹⁴ Judt, “Cyclorama: An Atlanta Monument”, 31.

¹⁵ Alexis Scott Reeves, “Mayor Rebuffs Attacks on Cyclorama Project,” *Atlanta Constitution*, February 6, 1979.

visiting adults and scores of Atlanta's school kids were taught the Civil War through the Atlanta Cyclorama's distorted lens, an intentionally misinterpreted narrative experience housed in a building that flew the U. S. flag and the Confederate flag at equal heights outside its doors.

The multi-million dollar restoration project took place between 1979 and 1982. During a preview event in December of 1981, Jackson stated, "Some people say it is ironic that this administration would work to save the Cyclorama... [but] I see no irony. Suffice it to say: Look at who won the battle."¹⁶ Jackson's continued emphasis on telling the fuller, truer story of The Battle of Atlanta and its aftermath would not be entirely realized during his administration, but he is certainly responsible for directing one of the biggest turns away from the Atlanta Cyclorama's mythmaking masquerading as Southern pride.

The third significant mayoral mediation occurred in September of 2011 when Kasim Reed initiated the Cyclorama Task Force, which led to the largest renovation project the Atlanta Cyclorama has experienced to date. In the summer of 2014, it was announced that the painting would be moved from its almost 100-year stay at Grant Park to the larger Atlanta History Center and the plan was to "restore the painting to its full size and overall height, and to re-create the 128-year-old painting's original visual perspective – both of which have been lost for nearly 100 years."¹⁷ While the project's initial vision focused heavily on the painting's logistical reframings, it was soon determined that this would also be the perfect opportunity to correct the painting's thematic shortcomings as well.

To do this, the Atlanta History Center decided to create an entire exhibit around the painting's complex history by correcting the mistruths attributed to the Atlanta Cyclorama and

¹⁶ T. L. Wells, "Officials Gather 'Round for Preview of Cyclorama," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 15, 1981.

¹⁷ Mayor's Office of Communications, "Mayor Kasim Reed Announces Relocation and Restoration of Atlanta Cyclorama," July 23, 2014, <https://www.atlantaga.gov/Home/Components/News/News/2952/672?arch=1&seldept=9>.

using the painting's own twisting journey to discuss the larger false narratives applied to the Civil War, The Lost Cause, and Reconstruction. During the massive project, Atlanta History Center president Sheffield Hale stated, "No other object can so vividly tell the story of how attitudes toward the Civil War have been shaped and reshaped over the past 150 years... *The Battle of Atlanta* will become one of the best tools in the nation to demonstrate the power of the use and misuse of historical memory."¹⁸ This intentional focus on memory, meaning, and myth informed every step of the project, telling the story of not just how the painting's content has shifted and evolved over the years, but why its context has as well.

The newly restructured Atlanta Cyclorama debuted at the Atlanta History Center on February 22, 2019, under the cleverly-layered name "Cyclorama: The Big Picture." The recontextualized painting and its accompanying exhibit seeks to answer the questions: "How can perceptions, memory and interpretations be shaped, or mis-shaped, by a combination of art and entertainment, myth and memory, cultural context, and current events during different eras?"¹⁹ The visitor experience is wholly designed to address those questions at every turn. Upon entering the viewing area, visitors are shown a short film about the painting's history and the misinterpretations physically applied to its canvas and narratively applied to its legacy.

Outside the massive rotunda that holds the painting, there are a variety of artifacts, photographs, wall plaques, memorabilia, multimedia exhibits, and more that track the story of the Atlanta Cyclorama and clarify much of the larger myths surrounding the Civil War and Reconstruction. Some of the most impactful pieces of this recontextualizing effort can be found in the interactive touchscreen that plays recordings of past Cyclorama narrations, the wall texts

¹⁸ Atlanta History Center, "Atlanta History Center Prepares for Monumental Move of *The Battle of Atlanta* Cyclorama Painting," <https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/assets/documents/Atlanta-History-Center-Moves-Battle-of-Atlanta-Painting-Release.pdf>.

¹⁹ Atlanta History Center, "Cyclorama: The Big Picture," <https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/explore/exhibitions/cyclorama-the-big-picture>.

that trace the complicated relationship between the city and the former Confederate shrine, and the section on Civil War Myths addressing the Lost Cause, the white supremacy rewriting of Reconciliation, and the erasure of slavery as the primary cause of the Civil War.

By accurately telling the story of the Atlanta Cyclorama and directly addressing the myths and mistruths surrounding it, the Atlanta History Center has also started telling new stories and asking new questions about the painting. For example, while the enormous canvas depicts over 6,000 individuals, there is only one discernable African American man and not a single woman, although both groups were heavily involved in various roles during the battle. The Atlanta History Center reports that there were 400-600 African American men serving in various non-armed roles (scouts, stretcher bearers, cooks), as well as a large contingent of women serving in various medical roles. Both of these omissions are prime candidates for additional research efforts and are already on the Atlanta History Center's radar for further exploration.

In looking at the larger issues of determining what can be done with Confederate memorials through the microcosm of the Atlanta Cyclorama, it's clear that none of the individual cases can be assessed in isolation. They are all commemorations that embody distorted versions of the nation's past and each one carries messages of misinformation into the present day and even farther into the future, so long as they remain unchecked, uncorrected, and uncontextualized. As historian Daniel Judt has written, "The Cyclorama doesn't show us the history of a battle; it shows us a battle over history."²⁰ Thankfully, that ideological battle, much like the actual battle portrayed at the Atlanta Cyclorama, has countless historians and civilians alike fighting for the fullest, most inclusive, and most factually-accurate versions of its stories, its legacies, and at long last, its monuments.

²⁰ Daniel Judt, "Atlanta's Civil War Monument, Minus the Pro-Confederate Bunkum," *The Atlantic*, March 17, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/03/how-atlanta-cyclorama-lost-its-confederate-overtone/584938/>.