Historical Monuments as Material Culture

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http://www.public.iastate.edu/~soc.134
Material culture

Culture: language, values, beliefs, rules, behaviors, and artifacts that characterize a society (p. 32)

Material culture: artifacts of a society, which represent adaptations to the social and physical environment (p. 100)

Includes clothing, buildings, inventions, food, artwork, writings, music, etc.

Material culture both reflects and shapes nonmaterial culture (e.g., norms, values, ideology)

James Loewen’s *Lies Across America* (1999): a study of monuments as material culture

Loewen distinguishes between “past” (things that happened) and “history” (what we say about them)
Nathan Forrest statue in Memphis, TN

- Confederate cavalry leader
- Forrest has more statues in TN than any other state honors a single person
- Historic sites are always the tales of two eras
  - Era of person or event honored
  - Era when monument was erected
- Forrest monuments erected between Reconstruction and Civil Rights movement
- Forrest is symbol of white supremacy
  - First national leader of KKK
  - Slave trader before war, hired black convict labor after war
  - Led massacres of black soldiers during war

Faithful slaves of Fort Mill, S.C.

- Monuments throughout the South honor slaves who were loyal to the Confederacy
- In fact, most slaves stopped working, fled, joined the Union Army and/or engaged in espionage
- No monuments in South honor local blacks in Union Army
- Intent of monuments is to present slavery as benign institution that had support of slaves

Indian Statue in Muscatine, Iowa

✓ Although presented in 1926 by “Muscuitine Tribe” and dedicated to “Mascoutin Indians,” no such tribe existed in Muscatine then.

✓ Actually built by “Improved Order of Red Men,” white fraternal organization.

✓ White-built monuments to Indians tend to justify conquering Indians by:
  • Honoring Indians who helped whites
  • Honoring Indian tribes who are no longer there
  • Honoring Indians as “vanishing race” (as by Red Men)

Monuments are usually proposed by local organizations and present favorable picture of community
  • Often leave out unpleasant history
  • May commemorate things that never happened

Almo, Idaho, monument commemorates Indian massacre of 296 whites that never happened

Another example: Pittsburg, Tx, has monument to airplane inventor Rev. Burrell Cannon

Target for snowplow revisionism?

Loewen gives as example of case where “reasonable people” disagree
Carrie Chapman Catt was national leader in women’s suffrage movement
Claimed “white supremacy will be strengthened, not weakened, by woman suffrage”
Opponents (Sept. 29 [1995] Movement) argued her racist statements made her an inappropriate person to name a building after
Proponents argued she was “product of her times”
Jaime Schultz argues that the decision to name our stadium after Jack Trice in 1997 was a response to Catt Hall controversy
Trice was largely forgotten from his death in 1923 until 1973

Beginning in 1973 the Trice story was retold as a story of racism and a student movement (resisted by the administration) began to name the stadium after Trice
Schultz believes that naming the stadium after Trice was an attempt to tell a more positive story about race at ISU