

THE MAMMY STATUE WASHINGTON ALMOST HAD



Hattie McDaniel as Mammy in Gone With the Wind (MGM)

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If I say the word "Mammy," you're likely to conjure up the character from *Gone With the Wind*. Or, you may think of Aunt Jemima, in her trademark kerchief, beaming from boxes of pancake mix.

What you probably won't picture is a massive slave woman, hewn from stone, cradling a white child atop a plinth in the nation's capital. Yet in 1923, the U.S. Senate authorized such a statue, "in memory of the faithful slave mammies of the South."

As a Southern Congressman stated in support of the monument: "The traveler, as he passes by, will recall that epoch of southern civilization" when "fidelity and loyalty" prevailed. "No class of any race of people held in bondage could be found anywhere who lived more free from care or distress."

Today, it seems incredible that Congress sanctioned a monument to so-called Faithful Slaves -- just

blocks from the Lincoln Memorial, which had been dedicated only months earlier. But the monument to the Great Emancipator masked the nation's retreat from the "new birth of freedom" Lincoln had called for at Gettysburg, three score and ten years before. By 1923, Jim Crow laws, rampant lynching, and economic peonage had effectively reenslaved blacks in the South. Blacks who migrated north during and after World War One were greeted by the worst race riots in the nation's history. In the capital, Virginia-born President Woodrow Wilson had recently segregated federal facilities and screened *Birth of a Nation* at the White House. The overtly racist movie exalted the Ku Klux Klan, which peaked at two million members in the 1920s and won control of mayors' office and state legislatures across the land.

"We have this image of the 1920s as the Jazz Age, the birth of the modern, a world of skyscrapers and flappers," says David Blight, a Yale historian and leading scholar of race in the late 19th and early 20th century. "But white supremacy had few better moments in our history."

The early 1900s were also the heyday of Old South nostalgia. Popular songs and bestselling novels depicted antebellum Dixie as a genteel land of benevolent "planters" and happy "servants." Central to this idyll was the figure of Mammy, who in popular imagination resembled Uncle Tom's wife, Aunt Chloe, a cheerful, plump slave in a checked kerchief. White performers blackened their faces to tell stories and sing spirituals in the style "of the old time 'house darkey.'" The ready-made pancake mix of Aunt Jemima -- a "slave in a box," as one historian puts it -- quickly became a national sensation; a "biography" of her was subtitled "the Most Famous Colored Woman in the World."

In reality, the pancake mix was the creation of two white men in Missouri, and they named it after a character in a minstrel song, not an actual slave cook. Similarly, there is more folklore than fact underlying the stereotype of matronly slaves nursing young whites. "I went in search of the mammy and couldn't find her," says historian Catherine Clinton, whose books include *Tara Revisited* and *Plantation Mistress*. "Most slaves who looked after white children were very young." In other words, more like Prissy in *Gone With the Wind* than Mammy.

Or even younger. Harriet Tubman, for instance, was seven when she began caring for a baby and was whipped if the infant cried. Ex-slaves interviewed by the WPA in the 1930s also told of nursing babies as girls themselves, while the older black women of mammy lore looked after slave children whose mothers labored in the fields. These interviews also cast a harsh light on the supposedly privileged status of "house" slaves. One former slave recalled a "Mammy" being lashed "till de blood runned out"; another described a rape by the slaveowner's sons. "I can tell you that a white man laid a nigger gal whenever he wanted," said an ex-slave from Georgia who "went into the house as a waiting and nurse girl" between the ages of nine and twelve.

These and other routine cruelties didn't figure in the moonlight-and-magnolia romance that seized white imagination in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Nor was the Mammy craze of that era confined to literature, song, and marketing. It was fostered by groups such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), which sought to recast the "Lost Cause" as a noble defense of a Southern utopia. If slaves had been loyal, well treated, and content, it followed that emancipation and Reconstruction were calamitous -- just as portrayed in *Birth of a Nation*. The ladies of the UDC honored aged blacks as "faithful Confederates" and even ghost-wrote testimonials such as "What Mammy Thinks of Freedom," in which an ex-slave says, "w'en I gits ter hebben, Lord, I hope I'll find its slabery."

This reactionary crusade culminated in a UDC campaign to build monuments to slaves who remained faithful out of "love of masters, mistresses and their children." Initially, this effort was confined to the South. But black migration to the North, race riots, and growing anxiety about what whites called the "Negro problem," made the nation more receptive to Southern images of bygone racial order.

So did the ubiquity of nurturing mammies in popular culture.

"Mammy was appealing at a particularly fraught time in national history," says Micki McElya, a historian at University of Connecticut and author of *Clinging to Mammy: the Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*. "Mammy represents paternalism and affection between the races, a world where everyone understands their places."

This was certainly the message of Charles Stedman, a North Carolina Congressman who in January 1923 introduced a Mammy monument bill on behalf of the Jefferson Davis Chapter of the UDC.

"They desired no change in their condition of life," Stedman said of the faithful slaves who would be honored. "The very few who are left look back at those days as the happy golden hours of their lives."

Stedman added that the bill "should find a responsive echo in the hearts of the citizens of this great Republic." It did, at least in the Senate, which voted for a land grant in the capital, so the UDC could erect the monument as "a gift to the people of the United States." The next day's *Washington Post* printed only a two-paragraph item, noting that the Senate had approved three monuments: to baseball, to a "former District commissioner," and to "faithful colored mammies."

African Americans, however, took far greater notice, led by the growing black press and by newly formed civil rights groups. "My own beloved mother was one of those unfortunates who had the flower of her youth spent in a slave cabin," one NAACP official wrote the *Washington Star*, describing the mammy statue as "a symbol of our servitude to remind white and black alike that the menial callings are our place." He added: "if the South has such deep gratitude for the virtues of this devoted group from which it reaped vast riches, let it remove the numberless barriers it has gone out of its way to throw up against the progress" of blacks.

One such barrier was lynching, which claimed some 2,500 lives between 1890 and 1920. The Senate, just weeks before approving the Mammy monument, had allowed a Southern filibuster to defeat an anti-lynching bill. (One Southern Senator called it "a bill to encourage rape" by blacks, while another contrasted this menace with the "unspeakable love that every southern man feels for the old black nurse who took care of him in childhood.") The proximity of the lynching and Mammy debates prompted the *Chicago Defender* to publish a cartoon titled "Mockery," in which a Southerner presents plans for the mammy statue to the dangling body of a lynching victim. The *Baltimore Afro-American* offered its own vision of the planned monument: a frowning Mammy perched atop a wash tub instead of a pedestal, her empty hand extended above the inscription: "In Grateful Memory to One We Never Paid a Cent of Wages During a Lifetime of Service."

Blacks also bristled at the stereotype of benignly affectionate relations between masters and hefty, aging mammies, who seemed never to have families of their own. A truer monument, one paper suggested, would be a statue to a "White Daddy," sexually assaulting a young black woman as a mammy looks helplessly on.

Plans for the actual UDC monument stoked still greater outrage.

One sculptor's model showed an Aunt Jemima-like figure holding a white child as two other children clung to her dress. These were "pickaninnies," the artist explained, "trying to have their mother pay attention to them instead of devoting all her time to the white children." Another sculptor proposed a seated Mammy with an infant at her breast, set within a columned fountain. The monument's backers favored this design and said it would be titled "The Fountain of Truth." According to the *Washington Post*, the monument was to be erected on Massachusetts Avenue, near an equestrian statue of the Union general, Philip Sheridan.

But the monument bill had to pass a House committee before it could be enacted. And blacks not only fulminated against the statue; they organized protests. Petitions and letters poured into the offices of politicians and newspapers, including one presented by two thousand black women to Vice

President Calvin Coolidge and the Speaker of the House. The women's auxiliary of the main Union veterans' organization, the Grand Army of the Republic, also condemned the monument as a "sickly sentimental proposition," and suggested the money would be better spent on "bettering conditions of the mammy's children."

Three months after the introduction of the monument bill in the Senate, Congress adjourned without having taken any further action. "Because of the controversy and resistance, it's ultimately allowed to die," says Micki McElya. And so, the Mammy statue quietly joined the ranks of monuments in the capital that were never built, including a towering "Mother's Memorial" and a plan for the Washington Monument that depicted the first president in a carriage atop thirty columns. The spot where Mammy was to have stood is now occupied by a statue of Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, a "champion of liberty" in Czechoslovakia.



But Mammy was by no means expunged from national consciousness. Four years after the monument proposal died, the first true "talkie," *The Jazz Singer*, featured a black-faced Al Jolson singing "Mammy." Twelve years later, Hattie McDaniel immortalized Mammy with her Oscar-winning performance in *Gone With the Wind*. In the 1950s and 60s, Disneyland included a restaurant called Aunt Jemima's Kitchen. And not until 1968 did Quaker Oats begin to give its famous cook a makeover; Jemima shed weight and her familiar bandana, gradually becoming the coiffed woman smiling from today's supermarket shelves.

Mammy also endures in stone, though not in the dramatic fashion the UDC once envisioned. At Confederate Park in Fort Mill, S.C., an obelisk "dedicated to the faithful slaves," unveiled in 1900, includes a mammy cradling a baby. In 1914, a towering monument was unveiled at Arlington National Cemetery to the "Dead Heroes" of the Confederacy. Standing near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the monument's frieze includes a turbaned and heavysset mammy, holding up a white child for a departing rebel to embrace.

Today, at the nearby Lee Mansion, visitors get a truer glimpse of what a mammy's life was like. Behind Robert E. Lee's stately columned home stand the simple slave quarters where up to ten people occupied a single room. In one, furnished with a pallet and chamber pot, lived "Nurse Judy," also known as "Mammy," who cared for Lee's children, one of whom described her in a letter as "very weak and thin."

Another counterpoint to the Southern lore of contentedly servile black woman can be found across the Potomac River, at 10th and U Street in Northwest Washington. It is a monument titled "Spirit of Freedom," honoring the almost 210,000 blacks who served in the Union Army and Navy during the Civil War. The sculpture includes a black woman holding her own child, beside a black soldier. A monument to black servicemen was first proposed in 1916 but not built in Washington until 1998.

"I'm proud this country finally got around to honoring these guys who fought for freedom," says a recent visitor to the monument, Joseph Brown, a retired black finance manager from Houston. His pride, however, dimmed a bit when he was shown a grainy picture of the very different monument that was proposed in 1923. "You're kidding me. We almost put up Aunt Jemima near the Mall?"

Brown's grandmother worked in a white home in Louisiana. He believes many Southerners were sincere in their affection for "mammies" and "maids," noting that half the people at his grandmother's funeral were white. "That history really happened, and there was genuine closeness," he says. "But a Mammy monument? That's repugnant, because it's using her as a symbol of servitude."

Historian Catherine Clinton says that if the monument had been built, it would strike tourists today as "a monstrous apparition" from our past. It might even have been hidden from view, inside a box -- the fate of a faithful slave memorial in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. But rather than cringe over the Mammy monument, Clinton believes we should celebrate the "unsung heroism" of those who opposed it. The controversy mobilized black women whose protests were a precursor of their activism in the civil rights movement of later decades. One such pioneer was Mary Church Terrell, a daughter of slaves who became founding president of the National Association of Colored Women* and later took part in pickets and other protests against segregation in the 1950s. As a leader of the protest against the Mammy monument, she warned that if it were built, thousands of blacks "will fervently pray that on some stormy night the lightning will strike it and the heavenly elements will send it crashing to the ground."

This wasn't necessary, Clinton observes, because Terrell and others "struck it down themselves."