

Tampa Bay Times

WINNER OF 10 PULITZER PRIZES

Perspective: Who belongs on the pedestal?

By Gary R. Mormino, special to the Tampa Bay Times

Friday, July 3, 2015 1:16pm

LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN AND OUR FATHERS THAT BEGAT US. THEIR SEED SHALL REMAIN FOREVER AND THEIR GLORY SHALL NOT BE BLOTTED OUT.

Ecclesiastes 44:1, 44:13

Alas, in the 21st century, the historical reputations of heroes and villains heave to and fro like the health benefits of kale and coffee.

In Florida, where roots are as shallow as an Australian pine, yesterday's heroes often wind up in the dustbins of history. The measure between marble and clay is time and timing.

Enshrining heroes used to be simple.

Consider Andrew Jackson. A steadfast patriot and military hero of New Orleans and Horseshoe Bend, Old Hickory's legacy was burnished by deadly duels and lively quarrels. When Jackson died, he was the most beloved American of the age. But Old Hickory's actions against American Indians and his support of slavery make him so controversial today that critics demand his rugged portrait be stricken from the \$20 bill.

Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, once lionized as a Cuban freedom fighter and a "Fighting Progressive," is now depicted as a gun-running sheriff and governor who drained the Everglades and proposed recolonizing African-Americans.

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, author of the 1938 novel *The Yearling*, whose prose ennobled poor whites and the Big Scrub, has also fallen from the pedestal. A decade ago, I was asked to recommend a book for Hillsborough County residents to share. I enthusiastically nominated my favorite novel, *The Yearling*.

A long silence greeted my answer. The librarian explained that Rawlings was unacceptable because of her use of the N-word. I pleaded that Rawlings' characters, not the author, used the forbidden N-word, and that Rawlings' outlook on racial issues was considered enlightened, but to no avail.

In 1864, Congress invited states to select two persons "illustrious for their historic renown or distinguished civic or military service." National Statuary Hall and its stately Rotunda had stood as the gathering place of the U.S. House of



Representatives in the early 19th century.

In bronze and marble, states began to send monuments of favorite sons (and occasionally daughters) to the national Capitol. From the beloved (Oklahoma's Will Rogers) to the exotic (Hawaii's King Kamehameha I), to the obscure (Arkansas' Uriah Rose), the august setting has functioned as an American Pantheon, an American Hall of Fame.

In 1914, Florida proudly dedicated a marble statue of Dr. John Gorrie, the "almost sacred" Apalachicola physician who in 1851 patented a "machine for the artificial production of ice."

In 1922, Floridians commissioned sculptor C.A. Pillars to cast a bronze statue of Edmund Kirby Smith. Born in St. Augustine in 1824, the son of Connecticut Yankees, the West Point graduate fought valiantly in the Mexican War, twice brevetted for gallantry. His brother died at the Battle of Chapultepec.

In 1861, he resigned his commission in the U.S. Army to join the Confederacy. Seriously wounded at the First Battle of Manassas, Kirby Smith was nursed back to health by a family slave. Alexander Hanson Darnes was born in the Kirby Smith home in St. Augustine around 1840. Serving as a valet for Master Kirby Smith, Darnes remained at his side through war and peace.

Promoted to the rank of lieutenant general, Kirby Smith became a corps commander in the Army of Tennessee. In 1863, Smith became commander of the Trans-Mississippi Department. The sprawling Trans-Mississippi Department — nicknamed "Kirby Smithdom" — sprawled across four states and four territories. Bedeviled by Comanche, bushwhackers and politicians, the frustrated commander ordered deserters to be "exterminated."

Smith spent his final years teaching mathematics at his beloved University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. The last Confederate general to surrender, he was also the last full general to die, in 1893.

The saga of Kirby Smith's manservant Alexander Darnes deserves a Hollywood movie, if not a pedestal in Statuary Hall. Freed in 1865, Darnes remained with Kirby Smith until 1867.

The freedman, with encouragement from his former master's family, enrolled at Lincoln University. The Kirby Smith family had not only instructed Darnes well in the arts of valeting, but had tutored him to read and write. Thriving in the academy, Darnes eventually earned a medical degree at Howard University, named for the "Christian General," O.O. Howard. Ironically, O.O. Howard and Kirby Smith had fought against one another at the First Battle of Bull Run.

Alexander Darnes served as the first black physician in Jacksonville, and only the second in Florida. During Jacksonville's terrible yellow fever epidemic in 1888, Darnes ministered to the city's citizens. James Weldon Johnson remembered Dr. Darnes fondly in his autobiography, writing, "He once gave us 50 cents each for learning the deaf and dumb alphabet." When Darnes learned of Kirby Smith's death, he wrote a letter to his widow, telling her what an honorable life the general had lived.

A crowd of 3,000 white and black citizens mourned Darnes' passing in 1894, the greatest funeral in the city's history. In 2013, the Kirby Smith chapter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans discovered that Dr. Darnes' tomb was in disrepair and erected a new marble gravestone.

In 2004, two bronze sculptures were dedicated at 12 Aviles St. in St. Augustine, the boyhood home of Kirby Smith and Alexander Darnes. The statues, titled "Sons of St. Augustine," depict a robed professor Kirby Smith ready to embrace Dr. Darnes in his frock coat. The artwork was sculpted by the great-granddaughter of Kirby Smith.

As Floridians, do we have a moral or civic duty to reconsider our heroes? Gorrie, the father of modern air conditioning, is now blamed for making Florida so comfortable in summer that millions of Yankees live here year-round. In the words of the Grand Ole Opry's Uncle Dave Macon, "I'd rather ride in a wagon and go to heaven, than hell in an air-conditioned automobile."

In the haunting minstrel song-turned popular melody, "Dixie," the lyrics remind white and black southerners, "Oh I wish I was in the land of cotton, Old times there are not forgotten ..." Amid today's rancorous debate over the Confederate flag, racial violence, and past heroes, the life of Alexander Hanson Darnes offers a sterling story of

Matthew 28: 21-35, the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. The biblical tale reminds us that our past misery does not allow us to be cruel to our servants, that honor and dignity depend upon character and decency, not station or position. Born a slave, Darnes survived war and upheaval to drink deeply from the well of freedom. Once a freedman, Darnes led a life of purpose, ministering to the sick and offering hope to the less fortunate. Above all, Darnes understood the power of forgiveness, a heroic quality

Gen. Kirby Smith's fate may already have been cast by the surging distaste against all things Confederate. His Confederate credentials notwithstanding, his status is dubious, since he left the state when he was so young.

Difficult questions persist. Having betrayed his oath to protect his nation, does Kirby Smith's conduct rise to the level of treason when he took up arms against the United States? Should we remove his name from buildings honoring his legacy (Kirby Smith Middle School in Jacksonville and Kirby Smith School in Gainesville)?

In 2003, Congress allowed states to remove an inductee from Statuary Hall and choose a new selection. Indeed, six states have recalled once-famous men.

Alabama replaced Jabez Lamar Curry with a statue of Helen Keller. California summoned home Thomas Starr King, replacing "the orator who saved a nation," with the Great Communicator, Ronald Reagan. The California Legislature is also contemplating replacing Fray Junipero Serra with astronaut Sally Ride. Presumably, the statue of the saintly missionary will be toppled, much like the Hungarians toppled monuments to Stalin and Lenin.

Whom should Florida anoint? One shudders at the prospects of judging yesterday's heroes by today's standards. This historian predicts that the Florida Legislature will shirk its responsibility and ask Florida schoolchildren to nominate a New Age hero. In this case, only the Florida panther or West Indian manatee could possibly survive the vetting process.

If yesterday's heroes do not live up to the ideals of the marble men, what about yesterday's villains? Second acts and reinvention seem pure Americana.

Consider Osceola. The son of a Scottish father and a Creek mother, Osceola battled U.S. troops in the Second Seminole War, displaying courage, conviction and cruelty. He was also the most reviled and hunted person on the peninsula. But today, a county boasts his name, while millions of Floridians cheer lustily for Osceola and Renegade at FSU football games.

LeRoy Collins richly deserves the eloquent phrase *Times* retired associate editor Martin Dyckman conveyed upon the governor and statesman: "Floridian of His Century." The Florida Legislature, however, will unlikely embrace such a Democratic icon.

Mary McLeod Bethune, Zora Neale Hurston, Marjory Stoneman Douglas and James Weldon Johnson deserve serious consideration. Bethune, the 15th of 17 children of former slaves, was a courageous educator, the founder of Bethune-Cookman College and a confidante of Eleanor Roosevelt.

The founder of the National Council of Negro Women, she was called "the First Lady of the Struggle." She was the first African-American to head a federal agency, and when President Harry Truman appointed her to the founding meeting of the United Nations, she was the only woman of color among the polyglot delegates.

Zora Neale Hurston was Florida's most gifted novelist. The product of the remarkable all-black community of Eatonville, Hurston's work as an ethnographer and writer in the New Deal's Federal Writers' Project is legendary. Her highs may have been higher and her lows lower; she once observed that she had "licked all the pots in sorrow's kitchen."

When she died in 1998 at age 108, Marjory Stoneman Douglas had spent a full life as a journalist, a World War I veteran, a poet, a reformer, a feminist and environmental activist. Her 1947 classic, *The Everglades: River of Grass*, helped promote awareness of this Florida treasure. As a senior citizen, Douglas demonstrated grace, energy and occasional fury.

Born in 1871 Jacksonville, James Weldon Johnson was a renaissance man. The arc of his life included literary fame (*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*), a diplomat (serving as a U.S. consul in Venezuela), a major participant in the Harlem Renaissance, and a pioneering civil rights activist (he served as executive secretary of the NAACP). He also composed the lyrics to the anthem, Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing.

Floridians might pause to consider the singular accomplishment of Wankard Pooser. The Jackson County state legislator was elected and re-elected on a simple campaign promise: He pledged to vote no on every single bill placed before him. Pooser broke his vow only once, and voters promptly sent him home.

Politicians once dominated the ranks of American heroes. Alas, their reputation now rests somewhere between journalists and telemarketers. Perhaps Nancy Reagan's astrologer was correct, that the stars are not aligned to produce heroes. In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Cassius — he of "the lean and hungry look" — understood our predicament. "The fault dear Brutus," states the Roman, "lies not in our stars but in ourselves."

Gary R. Mormino is the Frank E. Duckwall professor emeritus of history at USF St. Petersburg. The Florida Humanities Council's scholar in residence, he first explored this issue in the 2004 issue of Forum magazine.

Perspective: Who belongs on the pedestal? 07/03/15

[Photo reprints](#) | [Article reprints](#)

© 2015 Tampa Bay Times

5

Tweet

2

7



[Commenting Guidelines](#)



[Abuse Policy](#)

Ads by Adblade

Articles and offers from around the Web