

Confederate monument's arrival was delayed by *Titanic's* sinking

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*Archivist's Note: With the current interest in Confederate monuments around the South, it seems timely to revisit the story of the two Confederate statues in downtown Athens. This article was originally published May 10, 2012, in The Valley Star.*

A century ago today, the world was asking: "How could the world's most unsinkable ship now be in the bottom of the ocean?"

But while the April 15, 1912, sinking of the *RMS Titanic* was making national headlines, folks in Limestone County were also asking another question: "Where is our monument?"

The monument in question was an Italian marble statue of a proud Confederate soldier, and the answer would lie on the bottom of the ocean with the *Titanic*.

The monument had already had quite a journey on its way to the Limestone County Courthouse Square. Its story began in early 1906, when the United Daughters of the Confederacy launched a program to erect a monument to honor the Confederate soldiers of Limestone County.

That fall, Jerry Ragsdale of Pulaski, Tenn., met with the UDC to discuss the proposed Confederate Monument. He said the \$600 they had was enough to get started on monument. The Daughters were planning to erect the statue in the Confederate Circle of the Athens City Cemetery, but it was suggested that they place it on the courthouse square instead, in the middle of the street where passengers riding the L&N train through town could see it.

For the next three years, the local papers were full of notices of this fundraiser and that one, as the Daughters worked to raise the \$1,250 needed to finish their project. UDC member Mary Mason wrote, "We knew full well the work it represented to raise money to meet our notes."

On Saturday, June 26, 1909, the memorial unveiling was held on the Square. Mrs. A.P. McClelland pulled the cord to drop the veiling from the monument... and some folks struggled to hide their disappointment.

The monument itself was beautiful: A white marble statue, finely sculpted in Italy, stood on top of its granite base. One inscription on the base read "Ennobled by Triumph, Exalted by Defeat." But the soldier depicted – a young Southern soldier standing with his head bowed, armed crossed on his chest with his hat in his hand – was not what many wanted to see. In short, as one Confederate veteran told the UDC in 1912, it made them look like they had been "whooped." The UDC, fresh out of money – and the energy and ideas for more fundraising projects – were at a loss as to what to do about the monument when Thomas Maclin Hobbs, whose father, Thomas Hubbard Hobbs, had died in Virginia during the War, saved the day. Hobbs stepped forward and offered to pay for a new monument to go on the courthouse lawn, on the condition that he be allowed to choose the inscriptions to go on the new monument. So the old statue of the soldier with the bowed head was moved to the Confederate Circle in the Athens City Cemetery, where the ladies had wanted it in the first place, and a new statue was ordered from Naples, Italy.

Local folks waited... and waited... and then on May 22, 1912, the following article appeared in the Alabama Courier: "Information has been received by Mr. R.J. Ragsdale of Pulaski, who erected the Confederate Monument in this place, that the figure to take the place of the figure surmounting the monument, has arrived in New York, but the bill of lading was on the ill-fated Titanic and went to the bottom with the ship. As soon as a duplicate bill of lading arrives the figure will be shipped to Athens, and it is hoped it will be ready to be placed in position early in June, the exact date to be announced by Camp Hobbs."

Finally the monument arrived, and in late June, 1912, the image of a proud, chin-up Southern soldier was dedicated on the northeast side of the courthouse lawn, where it still stands today.

And as far as Hobbs' stipulations go, these are the inscriptions he chose:

- "The knightliest of the knightly race who, since the days of old, have kept the lamp of chivalry alight in hearts of gold." – Francis Orrery Ticknor, from "The Virginians of the Valley."
- "In memory of the strangers who in the baptism of our soil with their heroic blood have honored us. Lest we forget."

*Note: Much of the information from this article comes from Alabama's Confederate Monuments and Markers: Alabama Division, United Daughters of the Confederacy.*