

## 2020 AND THE FUTURE OF ALABAMA HISTORY

### ABOUT

*2020 and the Future of Alabama History: A Conversation with Calvin Chappelle* was held on Wednesday, August 19, 2020. Calvin Chappelle is Site Director of Confederate Memorial Park, a property of the [Alabama Historical Commission](#).

Sponsored by the [Alabama Historical Association](#) and the [Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University](#).

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### TRANSCRIPT

Mark Wilson:

Hello, and welcome to this program on 2020 and the Future of Alabama History. I am Mark Wilson, secretary of the Alabama Historical Association and director of the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University. This is our third program on 2020 and the Future of Alabama History and we are glad that you are here. But first, Frazine Taylor, president of the Alabama Historical Association has a word of welcome. Frazine?

Frazine Taylor:

Good afternoon, and it's a pleasure to be with you this afternoon. For my generation and others, we learned about the Civil War from one viewpoint. That has changed some over recent years, but there are still relics of that viewpoint among us today. We have been reminded this year of how much work there are yet to be done and I'm thankful that we are able to discuss this topic today with Calvin Chappelle of the Alabama Historical Commission. Thank you.

Mark Wilson:

Thank you, President Taylor. We are joined today by Calvin Chappelle, a fifth generation Alabamian born in Montgomery, director of the Confederate Memorial Park in Marbury, Alabama, a historic site of the Alabama Historical Commission. Welcome, Calvin.

Calvin Chappelle:

Thank you, great to be here.

Mark Wilson:

Glad that you are with us. 2020, a historic year for many reasons of course, but also for understanding history. Communities, local, and state governments are making changes related to monuments and memorials to the Confederacy and some are moving those monuments and memorials from the public square to designated parks and museums.

Mark Wilson:

You direct Confederate Memorial Park and its museum and so you have a particularly interesting perspective on the changes that are taking place. For everyone watching online, we'll take your questions for Calvin, so feel free to place a question in the comments section on Facebook. Now then Calvin, let's begin with the story of this historic site, how did it began and for what purpose?

Calvin Chappelle:

Sure. Well beginning in the 1880s, 28 northern states had established homes for Union Army veterans and these homes, they received both state and federal funding. Around the same time, homes for Confederate veterans are established in 15 southern states, and as well as California. And despite the depressed post-war economy and no federal funding for our former Confederate soldiers, southern state government sought to provide for veterans through pensions and through the creation of soldiers' homes.

Calvin Chappelle:

And the driving force behind the establishment of a care facility for our former soldiers in Alabama was a man named Jefferson Manly Falkner who was an attorney and a public official in Montgomery who had actually served in the eighth Confederate cavalry. And Falkner donated 102 acres of land in Mountain Creek, which is located in the southeast corner of Chilton County. Mountain Creek was considered an ideal site for such a facility because it already had a reputation as being a healthy area, it had high elevation, numerous springs, running streams, it also had convenient access to the L&N Railroad.

Calvin Chappelle:

So many well-to-do families from Montgomery including Falkner's had built summer homes at Mountain Creek to avoid the occasional malaria and yellow fever epidemics in Montgomery. Falkner had organized a number of fundraisers to support this effort and assisting him was a United Confederate Veterans camp which was named in his honor. And the stated goal of the UCV camp, Jeff Falkner, was to see that all Confederate veterans living in Alabama who cannot take care of themselves were properly cared for.

Calvin Chappelle:

So they held many charity events such as dances and quilt raffles and speeches, all held to raise money for the construction of the soldiers' home. And actually, one of the largest fundraising efforts was construction of a building called Memorial Hall. The first floor of Memorial Hall was constructed using 500 memorial logs, each were purchased with a \$10 donation and for that donation, the donor would have the name of a Confederate soldier mounted on a brass plate on the log.

Calvin Chappelle:

And the response to this was excellent, donations of money came from many different sources and records show that more than 500 memorial logs were actually purchased. Other donations came from numerous individuals, schools, church groups, even small children. Other sizable donations came in the form of materials, so everything from lumber to dairy cows. Some donations came from notable individuals, including Booker T. Washington who personally sent \$100, Falkner had already worked with Washington during the Alabama State Fair.

Calvin Chappelle:

Another interesting donation was from Ell Torrance, who was commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, which was the Union veterans' organization. And Torrance encouraged other GAR camps to contribute money, and they would actually raise enough money to construct one of the cottages at Mountain Creek which was named in their honor. It was called the blue and gray cottage. So the construction of the facility actually began in April of 1902 and in May, the first veterans were admitted to the soldiers' home.

Calvin Chappelle:

Any Confederate veteran from any state was eligible to be admitted to the home, but they had to meet a set of requirements. You had to live in the state for at least two years, you had to have served honorably, this was verified by the military records held by the US War Department. And you had to have a yearly income of less than \$400, which was pretty much considered the poverty line at that point in time. The large number of veterans applying to the home soon cause Falkner to realize that the project was bigger than just himself.

Calvin Chappelle:

And so he reaches out to the state for assistance and in response in October of 1903, the State of Alabama assumes ownership and administration of the home. And Falkner was actually named chairman of the executive committee and he will serve in that role until his death in 1907. Wives were also admitted with their veteran husbands, as long as they have been married for at least five years and were over 60 years of age. Initially, wives whose husbands had died at the home were supposed to leave the home.

Calvin Chappelle:

But there's no indication that this ever occurred and in fact, the rule was changed in 1915 to allow them to stay. So in total, the soldiers' home consisted of about 22 buildings including 10 cottages, an administrative building, a hospital, a mess hall, several barns and other outbuildings. And it was intended to hold a maximum attendance of about 100 individuals, although we know during the peak years between 1914 and 1918, as many as 104 residents actually lived there.

Calvin Chappelle:

So in many ways, this was his own self-serving community. We know that veterans did travel occasionally to Montgomery, they might go to the road to the post office but they also attended other Confederate reunions in other states. In fact, a handful went to the 1913 reunion at Gettysburg for the 50th anniversary. So it was not an island unto itself, the home also had frequent visitors, it was promoted by the L&N Railroad as a popular stop during your travels. And they held many events, including 4th of July celebrations, of course Confederate Memorial Day celebrations and even federal competitions.

Calvin Chappelle:

But as the years passed, the number of veterans dwindled. And eventually everybody lived in the soldiers' home hospital, the last residing veteran who died in 1934 and in 1939, there were five remaining widows at the home and the state found other places for them to live and close the facility. So during its 37 years of existence, somewhere between 650 and 800 Confederate veterans, their wives and widows lived at the home.

Mark Wilson:

So how many buildings remained now at the park?

Calvin Chappelle:

None, really. There are some left-over foundations and some ruins, there what's left-over from the intricate water system, you can see some of the car body gas tanks but basically everything was dismantled when the home closed in 1939.

Mark Wilson:

Wow. So you have a museum, tell us about the museum.

Calvin Chappelle:

Well, let me tell you a little bit more about the grounds and it'll probably answer your other question. Since it was state owned, everything was basically surplus. So some buildings had burned over the years, they didn't rebuild them but they took materials from the homes to build school houses. A lot of materials went to Selma, Alabama, the YMCA used them to build little cabins, in fact I think a few of those actually still survived today and for many years it was advertised as a minor park or a recreation area.

Calvin Chappelle:

And people had different ideas about what to use the site for, one of the ideas was to turn it into a national cemetery for the state. Another was to create a center for rehabilitation of wayward youth, someone else wanted to create a manmade lake and none of those actually comes to pass. But in 1960, the Alabama parks system gets a new director and he is very much energized about making improvements to the park, this isn't to say that other people were interested in the site.

Calvin Chappelle:

They did take people to take care of the cemeteries for a little while, but they eventually fall into disrepair. And in fact, in the 1950s there's a series of newspaper articles where people are complaining about the condition of the cemeteries. And so groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy and Sons of Confederate Veterans are working to revitalize and clean up those cemeteries. And so it was a collaborative effort between those heritage groups and the state and groups like the boy scouts that created the park of what it is today in some form or fashion.

Calvin Chappelle:

The park is officially established at... sorry, 1964 and it's placed under the administration of Alabama Historical Commission in 1971. So the first museum that opened actually opened in 1980 and it's a small two-room log cabin that doubles as a welcome center. Our museum now that we're in was built in 2007. So the park still consists of the original 102 acres, there's two cemeteries where 298 veterans and 15 widows are buried.

Calvin Chappelle:

And of course, we're part of the Alabama TREASURE Forest and we have a walking trail so there's plenty to see on site, as well as a couple of historic buildings which are the Marbury Methodist Church and the Mountain Creek Post Office which were just up the road in Marbury but were brought to our site in the mid-1980s for preservation. So there's plenty to see on the park grounds itself before you actually get to the museum, but our museum today really interprets the life of the Alabama Confederate soldier from young recruit until aging veteran.

Calvin Chappelle:

And now of course, it talks about Alabama's role in the Civil War. So we have different panels and different sections throughout the museum that might talk about succession and how Alabama prepared for war in the very beginning. We have sections on artillery, navy, the cavalry, the infantry, topics include subjects like music, life in the home front. We have a lot of weapons on display from time period, we talk about Alabama arsenals, how Alabama had manufacturing facilities that were assisting with war effort.

Calvin Chappelle:

And of course, we talk a lot about the veterans themselves, their post-war experience and life at the soldiers' home. So all of this is done through several hundred objects that are on display, several hundred artifacts, numerous text panels. And then throughout the museum are quotes from the Confederate veterans and Confederate soldiers, they give in-depth perspective of their life in the time period.

Mark Wilson:

So you have some visitors who'd come to walk the trails, to see the historic church, the historic post office, and then others who'd come for the museum and some for both I'm sure.

Calvin Chappelle:

Certainly, we have a lot of the locals use the site, they use our pavilions and picnic tables and they have family reunions there. And of course, we have outdoor special events as well. So we have a lot of local traffic and a lot of folks that come from out of town, they see the signs on the interstate and pull over to visit the site and the museum.

Mark Wilson:

Good. And I saw on your website that the state legislature established the park as you said in 1964 and the legislature said, "As a shrine to the honor of Alabama's citizens of the Confederacy." And of course this was part of the Civil War Centennial commemoration efforts, and it's 1964 so of course it's the same year as the important civil rights events, Bloody Sunday, the Selma to Montgomery march, the passage of the Federal Civil Rights Act. I think it's fair to say that all public memorials reflect the times in which they are designed and constructed and their snapshots of that moment as they seek to memorialize the past.

Mark Wilson:

But it's also true that our interpretation of the past changes as society changes, as power is shared and less concentrated as different questions related to the human experience are asked. And this makes museums important, it sounds like because they provide an opportunity for the public to consider various perspectives and approaches that they might not have considered before. So if all of that is true, what are the ways in which your museum helps visitors understand the Civil War for current and future generations?

Calvin Chappelle:

Yeah. I think if you look back at the work of Jefferson Manly Falkner, his early creation of Memorial Hall was in some ways a precursor to what the site would become today, a memorial. In many ways, Falkner considered the soldiers' home to be a living memorial, it's kind of a tribute to the average Confederate soldier, I mean which is really kind of what the museum focuses on. But I think as a modern society, we have to be careful not to generalize history or to draw specific parallels or conclusions.

Calvin Chappelle:

History is rarely that clean cut, but museums are a great place for both learning and reflection. One of the wonderful things about museums is our ability to add new content and to evolve when needed. This can certainly be said for our museum because we continually updated things since we opened in 2007 and we will continue to update moving forward. We also step outside of the physical museum and provide interpretation through walking tours and living histories and other things.

Calvin Chappelle:

But whatever the approach, what we want to promote is critical thinking. Right now, the museum does a great job of examining Alabama Civil War story and the history of the soldiers' home. But all of the museums need to be aware that the ways in which future generations both of Civil War history and their examination of history from the current standpoint. I think as we look to the future, it will be important for us to include new interpretations while still honoring the original purpose of our site and museum.

Calvin Chappelle:

So it's not necessarily an easy task, but it's not meant to be. For instance, it will be interesting and important to acknowledge the power of Civil War memory and how Union veterans, Confederate veterans and African-Americans all sought to tell and preserve their own distinct memories of the war. How they experienced the war, how they participated in it, how it will be remembered by future generations. So I think these sentiments have a powerful influence on how we interpret and feel about the Civil War today. And so I look forward to bringing some of those interpretations into our narrative at the museum.

Calvin Chappelle:

We're also working on plans for a new display case which would be used for rotating exhibits, so that way we can focus on other important facets of the Civil War. So that might be the role of Union troops in Alabama, which would of course include African-American soldiers who served the USCT units or maybe it's the role that women played during and after the war or a special exhibit on music or medicine or food in the commissary department, really the possibilities are endless.

Calvin Chappelle:

But I think whatever we do, it's important that we encourage constructive dialogue along the way. And this can really be as simple as a small discussion with a visitor or it can be a larger collaborative effort, involving a partnership with multiple cultural organizations. So really what matters is that we're willing to talk about history, that we're willing to listen and respect interpretations that differ from our own.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent, thanks. And you've been in the museum field for 20 years and so as you're entering into your third decade, it seems like you are in a good position to be able to do that. And I've got another question for you, but I'm happy to take questions from folks who are watching live right now. So if you have a question for Calvin, we love to see that in the comments section, we'll ask it. I do want to ask because thinking about just 28 miles down the road from you in Montgomery is the internationally recognized, still feels quite new even though it's been open for a little while now.

Mark Wilson:

The Equal Justice Initiative's legacy museum, from enslavement to mass and corporate incarceration and the memorial for victims of lynching. So when visitors go to that museum, they learn about the horrors of slavery and its aftermath, realized through segregation, white supremacy, lynchings, et cetera. If museums could sit down and talk and have a conversation, if EJI's museum which talks about the legacies of slavery and a Confederate memorial museum could sit down and have a conversation, what do you think these two museums could say to each other?

Calvin Chappelle:

Yeah. Again, I think it opens up the opportunity for dialogue. I've been to both sites and managed by the Equal Justice Initiative and it offers obviously a different interpretation that we offer and I think we're somewhat specific in the history that we interpret. But if people could visit both sites, I think it's going to broaden their understanding of not only the Civil War and say Alabama's role in the Civil War but also what comes before and what comes after.

Calvin Chappelle:

Because the Civil War history really doesn't begin in 1861 and end in 1865. In some ways we're still living the repercussions of the war and things were happening before the war that causes the war. And so I think any time, cultural organizations can partner and to use the strengths of other organizations to tell a more complete story that is an ideal situation for any visitor or any average citizen. It exposes them to a lot of different information and again, encourages critical thinking.

Mark Wilson:

And this is related to a question that someone has on Facebook now, "If visitors go to the museum now, how does your museum interpret slavery and do you move forward in time?" Like you said, it doesn't end in 1865, so do you move forward in time with exhibits on reconstruction?

Calvin Chappelle:

Yeah. We don't talk a lot about reconstruction, that would be an opportunity for that rotating exhibit that I was talking about moving forward. We certainly acknowledge that slavery was the main cause of the war and I think all historians pretty much acknowledge that nowadays. But the real focus is kind of Alabama and Alabama's soldier and the soldiers' home, so that is our primary focus but that is certainly things that we could discuss further through either special exhibits or special events.

Mark Wilson:

All right, thanks. And somebody has a question of wanting to see some photos of the park and we will put on Facebook a link to their website so that you can go and see there and maybe follow them on Facebook.

Calvin Chappelle:

I post a lot of photos on Facebook, so that'd be the best place to go.

Mark Wilson:

All right, that's great. So here we are in 2020 with a renewed interest as a result of all of the changes and the challenges that are taking place. And a real emphasis I think on understanding the past and knowing that the way we understand the past is to continue to study the past.

Mark Wilson:

And so what are some of your hopes for the future in addition to what you said in terms of the interest of people? What do you hope folks regarding all of the...? As a result of the murder of George Floyd, the social justice protests that are really trying to deepen our understanding of slavery and white supremacy and all of those things. What are your hopes from where you sit for the future?

Calvin Chappelle:

Well anybody who runs a museum or historic site, the challenge is always getting the people to their location. We want people to come in the doors, we want people to experience and to ask questions. So I think you mentioned renewed interest, I hope the interest goes beyond internet chatter, it goes beyond just talking to your neighbor or your family member about it, I hope it encourages people to get out. And of course, I know that's a little bit challenging now but to get out and to experience museums, to experience historic sites, to poke around on the web and learn from videos like this and conversations that we're having, to try to understand more and to broaden their perspective, right?

Calvin Chappelle:

To listen to different stories because there are so many topics about Civil War history, people specialize in just buttons or uniforms or some people focus on slavery or the life of people or the life of women. It's such a broad topic and there's much for us to learn. And so I hope that what's going on now in our society also encourages people to learn more, to pick up a book or visit a museum.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. And of course, museums are always seeking to provide events, certainly not during a pandemic, but what are some of the events that you hope to provide the public in the future whenever events can happen that will give people more of an experience of history? Are there events you would like to talk about?

Calvin Chappelle:

Sure. I started some walking tours about a year ago and I think it's a great opportunity to come and learn about the soldiers' home, all right? It's such a beautiful site that we have and so I think people should come out and walk the grounds with me when the opportunity arises again, not only a beautiful site but it's interesting to see how people cared for the elderly and for our veterans back then. We also host living histories and that is kind of developing, we've hosted those for school groups before, we're leaning towards a different approach, a kind of immersive events. Now we have some reproduction Civil War barracks that can actually house up to 100 individuals.

Calvin Chappelle:

And so two years ago, January 2019, we had those barracks filled and guys were basically living the life of a soldier in 1862. And I want to broaden our historical interpretation in that regard too, I think there's a lot to be said for life in the home front or for the African-American stories that those stories have not been told at the park before. And so hopefully I can find the right appropriate living historians to assist me in those goals.

Mark Wilson:

Yeah. Got you, let's see. Here's a question that's come in just now, "Could you imagine a situation in which the park becomes a home for some of the Civil War memorials that have been removed from Alabama cities and towns, thereby providing a platform to examine memorialization as a practice?"

Calvin Chappelle:

Yeah. I mean that certainly has been suggested, that is up to the Alabama legislature. I encourage the person who asked that question, go visit the Alabama Historical Commission website which is [ahc.alabama.gov](http://ahc.alabama.gov) and there's a resources tab there and there's a statement on monuments. So at this point in time it's all protected under Alabama law, the legislature would have to change that. So that's again, we won't know anything in that regard until maybe February, imagine that would be a hot topic of discussion looking forward to.

Mark Wilson:

Got you. And I think that's an important conversation that communities are having and I think everyone watching should be in touch with your locally elected official to find out where your community is on this issue, a really important question. So we're approaching the half hour mark, I'll see if there are other questions that are coming in. But it's a unique time to be a museum in 2020 with all of the challenges that we're facing in terms of the pandemic, in terms of the access, but you are open and folks can come out.

Calvin Chappelle:

We are open seven days a week aside from state holidays, right now we are limiting the museum to 10 people at a time, unless you're all from the same household. And we are asking everyone to wear masks, follow that six foot social distancing. But we are open, the park is open daily from dawn to dusk.

Mark Wilson:

But that could create another good opportunity if smaller groups have a chance to go with you and others through the museum to reflect a little on the history and what the future might bring in terms of new exhibits, new topics, additional work that can be done.

Calvin Chappelle:



Absolutely. And if a small group wanted to make a reservation and come as a small group, I'd be happy to give a personal tour of the facilities as well and answer any additional questions.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Well, we appreciate you being with us today. We appreciate the work that you do for Alabama history and we appreciate that the future is changing, but yet we're all a part of it and trying to make the stories that we tell as inclusive and as relevant as possible to everyone's interest.

Calvin Chappelle:

Absolutely.

Mark Wilson:

Great. Thanks for being with us.

Calvin Chappelle:

All right. Thank you for having me.

Mark Wilson:

Take care.

Calvin Chappelle:

You too.



**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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