The Cost of War: All Tragedy is Local
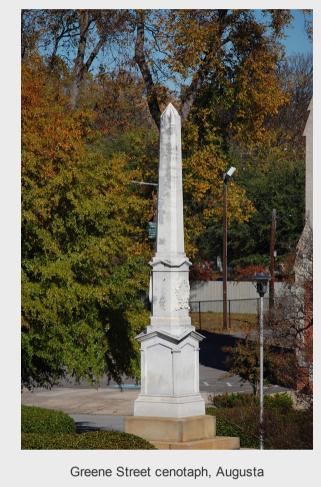
By Gould Hagler, April 3, 2020

Augusta Confederate Monument

The monument circa 1900 | LOC

A grand Confederate monument stands on Broad Street in Augusta, Georgia. It towers over the cars and people below and looks down on many of the nearby buildings. A common soldier stands at rest on top of the column. Below are four generals: Lee, Jackson, W.H.T. Walker, and Thomas Cobb. The memorial was erected by the Ladies Memorial Association in 1878 at a cost of $17,000—over $400,000 in today's money, a huge amount for a Southern city after the Civil War. This imposing structure, however, is not the sole Confederate monument in Richmond County. Two other memorials, far more modest than the Broad Street monument, tell us in very personal terms what cost four years of war imposed on the people of this Georgia county.

Greene Street, just two blocks south of Broad, is a long, beautiful avenue with a garden-like median. A walk along this garden from west to east will lead you past numerous monuments honoring men and women from all aspects of Augusta's history, from one dedicated to the three Georgians who signed the Declaration of Independence to one honoring four Southern poets. Near the end of your stroll, after you pass Fifth Street, you will encounter an obelisk built in 1873 by the Cenotaph Club and the Saint James' Sabbath School. Like the monument on Broad, this one honors the men of the county who lost their lives in the war.

Greene Street cenotaph, Augusta

A cenotaph is a sepulchral monument honoring a dead person or persons buried elsewhere. Many of the dead to whom this cenotaph is dedicated are buried far from home, many in unmarked graves, in places unknown to their loved ones. They went to war never to return, even in death.

The names of the dead are inscribed on the cenotaph. One tablet lists the members of the Sabbath School who fell. Twenty-four names are inscribed here, names of men who prayed together in this single Methodist Church. Other surfaces list the other war dead of the county. The names are so numerous that they overflow the tablets designed for them and spill over to the base below. Altogether nearly 300 men from this one community are honored by this modest cenotaph.

Confederate monument, Fort Gordon, Richmond County

Another mournful monument, one perhaps even sadder than this one, is difficult to find. It is in a section of Richmond County which for many decades has been part of Fort Gordon. Before the area was acquired by the United States Government it contained farms, crossroads hamlets, and numerous country churches with their cemeteries. The churches are long gone, of course, but the cemeteries remain. At the intersection of two dirt roads is cemetery # 30, which contains the oldest Confederate monument in Georgia. It was built in June 1866 by the Linwood Sunday School. The Civil War claimed the lives of 23 men from this tiny community. Like their comrades and fellow Christians from Saint James', these men were killed in battle, died of wounds after days or weeks of suffering, succumbed to disease in camp or hospital, or went from this life to the next while trapped in a dismal prison.

In the Civil War over a quarter of a million men lost their lives in service to the Confederacy. Over 300,000 Union soldiers and sailors died. Numbers this huge tell of a vast armed struggle and remind us of the monstrous scale and long duration of the war. These big numbers tell us a lot. But smaller numbers scale the tragedy down from the level of the nation to the level of the community, the neighborhood, the church, and the family. The short list of names from the Saint James' Sabbath School in town and from the Linwood Sunday School in the countryside leave a different kind of impression, an impression intensely personal rather than statistical. These letters inscribed in stone paint an image of half-empty pews and of a minister of God preaching to a congregation dressed in black, preaching perhaps on the themes of the inscriptions on the Greene Street cenotaph: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* and *Immortalis est veritas.* "It is sweet and fitting to die for the homeland" and "the truth is immortal."