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Righting History: Monument Avenue, Richmond, Virginia

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Despite the widely accepted view that only victors get to write history, commemoration of the losing Confederate cause has been far more widespread in the United States than Union commemoration. While there may have been only a limited long-term impact on the writing of scholarly history, Confederate commemoration has been able to impose its often heavily sanitised Southern heroes and dubious history – that the ‘lost cause’ was about defending states’ rights – on many public spaces. This commemoration has taken many forms, including the erection of statues, the placement of plaques and the naming of schools, military bases and public buildings.¹

Confederate commemoration has always been contested. Black American politicians, who had been elected to the post-Civil War Virginia legislature prior to black disenfranchisement at the start of the twentieth century, spoke out against the first efforts at Confederate commemoration. As early as 1871, Senator Frank Moss objected to a proposal to display a portrait of General Robert E. Lee in the state Capitol. ‘Gen. Lee had fought to keep him in slavery’, Moss reasoned, ‘he couldn’t vote to put his picture on these walls.’² In 1890, when Confederate commemoration in Richmond began in earnest with the erection of a statue to Lee on Monument Avenue, black newspaper editor John Mitchell Jr was prescient in his understanding of the deeper ramifications: ‘The South may revere the memory of its chieftains. It takes the wrong steps in so doing, and proceeds to go too far in every similar celebration. It serves to retard its progress in the country and forges heavier chains with which to be bound.’³

However, the widespread dismantling of Confederate memorials is a recent phenomenon, given impetus by a number of key events. In 2015 a white supremacist murdered nine parishioners in a historic African American church in Charleston, South Carolina. In 2017 a rally by the far-right in Charlottesville, Virginia, erupted in violence resulting in one death. In both cases the white supremacists involved displayed Confederate symbols and images, including the Confederate battle flag. This violence, and its association with neo-Confederate extremists, helped to galvanise calls for action and prompted the removal of Confederate memorials across the South. Mitch Landrieu, Mayor of New Orleans, offered a comprehensive rationale for this response: ‘To literally put the Confederacy on a pedestal in our most prominent places of honor is an inaccurate recitation of our full past, it is an affront to our present, and it is a bad prescription for our future.’⁴ The eruption of Black Lives

Matter protests, prompted by the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in May 2020 but continuing throughout the year, further fuelled the momentum for the removal of Confederate monuments.

The state of Virginia has had more sites of Confederate commemoration than most other states in the United States. In Richmond, the former Confederate capital, the most important of these sites has always been Monument Avenue. This beautiful tree-lined boulevard, which traverses one of the city's historically affluent white districts, has a wide median strip along which a series of imposing monuments to Confederate heroes were erected. Following the erection of Robert E. Lee's eighteen-metre-high statue in 1890, others were added over the next four decades. In 1907 large memorials to Confederate President Jefferson Davis and Confederate General J.E.B. Stuart were unveiled, in 1919 Confederate General Stonewall Jackson's statue was unveiled and in 1929 a memorial to Confederate naval officer Mathew Fontaine Maury was completed. There would be no more additions until 1996 when, as outlined below, the Confederate theme was disrupted.

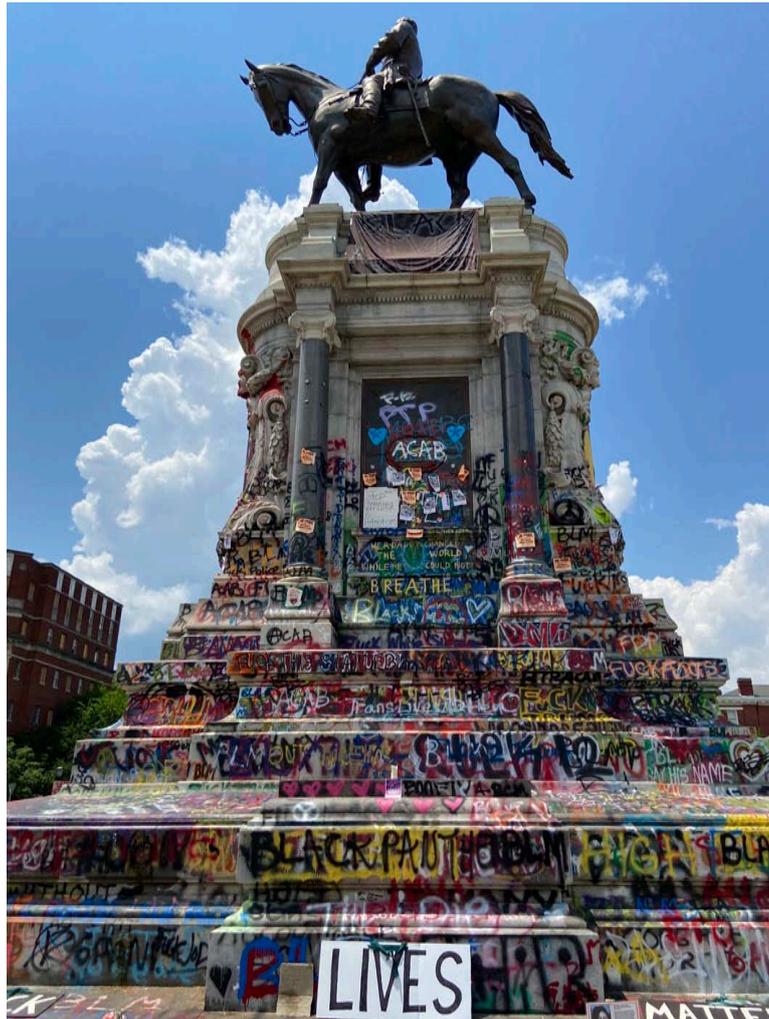
In mid-2017, as Confederate memorials were coming down across the South, Richmond's City Council established a commission to determine what to do with Monument Avenue. The results of the Monument Avenue Commission's research and community consultation were published in the *Monument Avenue Commission Report* in July 2018. The report noted the need for a comprehensive historical narrative as a guiding principle in its work and observed that this 'narrative requires coming to terms with elements of history that are far more cautionary than celebratory, more tragic than triumphal and recognizing – in some cases – these concepts can exist around the same subject.' Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney was clear in his view of the narrative presented by Monument Avenue: 'The story is, at best, an incomplete story – equal parts myth and deception.'⁵

The report went on to provide a concise history of Monument Avenue and brief discussion of its 'complicated legacy'. A key element in the historical context of Confederate commemoration was its connection with Southern attempts to push back on the result of the Civil War and reinstate a new form of white supremacy. The peak of monument building occurred in the early twentieth century. This was the period when black voters were being disenfranchised, the era of Jim Crow segregation was being consolidated and lynching was rife. Rather than being merely an innocent celebration of Southern heritage, the surge in commemoration and its distortion of the past was inextricably linked with white Southern determination to turn back the clock and impose values and structures that would cause widespread personal misery and ensure lasting division in the United States.

The full significance and danger of the commemoration was clear to John Mitchell Jr as early as 1890 when he described the crowds who attended the unveiling of Robert E. Lee's statue: 'Rebel flags were everywhere displayed and the long lines of Confederate veterans who embraced the opportunity and attended the reunion to join again in the 'rebel yell' told in no uncertain terms that they still clung to theories which were presumably to be buried for all eternity.'⁶ As the *Monument Avenue Commission Report* concluded:

At the root of the 'Lost Cause' Movement and Confederate memorialization was a sustained and deliberate effort to reshape the memory of the Civil War, its causes, and the role and nature of slavery.

... built largely in an era of African American disenfranchisement, racial violence, and Jim Crow segregation, the monuments reflect the dominance of those who constructed a new apparatus of white supremacy after the demise of slavery.⁷



Robert E. Lee, the most revered figure in the Confederate pantheon, was the first to be commemorated on Monument Avenue when his statue was unveiled in 1890. At the time of writing, in mid 2021, he is the last man standing of the Confederate heroes. However, his memorial has been re-purposed as a rallying point and canvas for Black Lives Matter and other protestors. (Photograph By Mk17b - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=91805269>)

The *Monument Avenue Commission Report* identified four ‘main opinion groups’ with views about the future of Monument Avenue’s Confederate monuments:

1. Keep the monuments – This group was largely concerned about their heritage being destroyed, with someone arguing that the monuments should ‘not be erased as ISIS would do’.
2. Keep and contextualise – This group wanted to keep the monuments but contextualise them, use them for education or add additional monuments. (See ‘Foundation Story: Melbourne’ for an Australian case study on how this approach has been applied to Melbourne’s Batman memorial – *HTAA Learning Sequences*, historyteacher.net.au/index.html)
3. Relocate the monuments – This group wanted to move the monuments to, among other suggestions, a Fallen Monuments Park (‘as other countries have done’) or a Jim Crow Museum.
4. Remove the monuments – This group simply wanted the monuments removed, with comments referencing both history and current events. It was argued that the monuments were offensive ‘relics

of white supremacy'. At the same time, it was pointed out that they had now been 'formalized as racist symbols after the Alt-right rallies'.⁸

The Commission's 'recommended options and opportunities' were a cautious reflection of the views of these four main opinion groups. The overall effect was to favour an approach that would create greater contextualisation for the existing monuments. An immediate outcome, prompted by the 'number of historical inaccuracies being repeated by the public throughout the public meeting process', was the creation of an On Monument Avenue website (onmonumentave.com). The Jefferson Davis monument was singled out for consideration for 'removal or relocation'. Of all the statues, it was 'the one most unabashedly Lost Cause in its design and sentiment'. In other words, its inscription perpetuated the myth that the Civil War had been about a noble cause to defend states' rights while omitting the truth that the only right being defended was the right to own slaves.⁹

In mid-2020 events quickly overtook ongoing careful deliberations about the fate of Monument Avenue's Confederate statues. The location became a focus for Black Lives Matter demonstrations and on 10 June Jefferson Davis was toppled from his low pedestal by protestors. On 1 July, Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney responded by announcing that the remaining Confederate statues on city-owned land would be removed. In announcing this sudden decision Stoney made it clear that a public safety crisis had provided an opportunity to implement a decision that he felt was 'past time'. Within a week, the Maury, Jackson and Stuart statues had been removed. At the time of writing in late 2020, Robert E. Lee is the last rebel left on Monument Avenue, situated on state rather than city-owned land, subject to a number of legal actions and, unlike Davis, well out of reach of protestors.¹⁰

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s coincided with a last surge in Confederate commemoration. Nevertheless, despite early resistance, this period marked the beginning of change throughout the South as segregation and the worst aspects of official discrimination were gradually dismantled. And even though prominent images and symbols of the Confederacy remained in place, the diverse heritage of many Southern communities began to be more widely acknowledged. In 1973 Richmond's first statue of a black man was erected – in honour of tap dancer and film star Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson.

Bojangles' statue was located in Richmond's historically black district of Jackson Ward. The decision to honour another famous former black resident, tennis great Arthur Ashe, proved to be more controversial when it was decided to add his statue to the line of Confederate heroes on Monument Avenue. Initial proposals were met with objections that Ashe's statue would be out of place because it would not have a sufficiently martial appearance. One newspaper correspondent used less coded language when he argued that 'the Ashe statue is the symbol of racially factional commemorative turf invasion, conveniently using a sports arriviste for a pretext'. When Ashe's statue was unveiled in 1996 – depicting him brandishing a book and a tennis racket, surrounded by children – a group of protestors held signs proclaiming that 'Southern heritage' was being destroyed.¹¹ Twenty-five years the former interloper has Monument Avenue to himself. The now graffiti-covered monument, which had a barrier fence built around it by civic authorities in January 2021, has become a prominent place for protest and a major site for protest art.¹² These reflect the end of segregation in society at large and a much more inclusive approach to Southern heritage.

Monument Avenue provides a great case study for school and university teachers interested in current controversies around memorials and commemoration. The *Monument Avenue Commission Report*, available online, is also a useful resource. More engaging than the usual document emerging from a committee-driven, bureaucratic process, it highlights how history is integral to the daily life of communities and demonstrates the need for informed and nuanced understanding of the past. The concise historical overview and collection of relevant documents provides an ideal framework for the report's detailed analysis of community views about Monument Avenue's Confederate memorials. There is an obvious opportunity here

