

The following is a longer version of a paper presented at the Northern Great Plains History Conference 2018, held this year in Mankato Minnesota. My paper was part of a panel:

Monuments and Memory

Blue Earth County Library Auditorium

Chair: Greg Kaster, Gustavus Adolphus College

Papers:

From Mankato to New Ulm:

The Issues of Public Memory and the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862

John Legg, Virginia Tech

Minnesota's Columbus Memorial:

Race, Memory, and Colonialism on the State Capitol Grounds

Peter DeCarlo, Minnesota Historical Society

Historians Respond to Contested History

Kellian Clink, Minnesota State University, Mankato

Panelists are limited to 20 minutes, so those comments were briefer and less contextualized than the following.

Historians Respond to Contested History

I always like to recognize that we study and live on the Dakota homeland. The buffalo monument across the street from us symbolizes the spiritual survival of the Dakota People and honors the Dakota heritage of this area. I would like to note in passing that another earlier monument was removed in 1971 that read "Here were hanged 38 Sioux Indians" and its final disposition is a mystery.

For this presentation, I wanted to read what historians were writing about Confederate monument removal. Looking through the database *America: History and Life*, I searched for

articles, limiting to “academic journals”, which may or not be considered academic history journals by historians. I limited to those articles with assigned subject headings of Civil War monuments with variations of different keywords for removal, limiting to the last few years. I only included those texts about monuments sitting in city centers. Monuments in cemeteries and battlefields pose different questions and have different audiences. Monuments represent hegemonic memory.

“Hegemony is the ability of a dominant group or class to impose their interpretations of reality—or the interpretations that support their interests—as the only thinkable way to view the world. The dominated groups come to accept the interests of the dominant ones as the natural state of the world. Hegemony thus establishes one particular narrative as a quasi-natural universality and delegitimizes alternative forms of reasoning. It is the successful creation of this powerful common sense of reality that includes most people in a social group while sapping those who think—or remember—outside the box.”¹

What has been unfolding for generations is a resistance to the hegemony of dominant groups. The questioning of confederate monuments’ place in the public square is just one form of resistance.

Before I launch into pithy summaries of the mixed sentiments I uncovered, I would like to share some of the insights I gained from some background reading.

James Loewen, in his book *Lies across America*, wrote “When Americans let biased monuments stand with no plaques to balance or contextualize their stories, and when we fail to revise inaccurate or incomplete historical markers, we imply that we continue to endorse these accounts—even though we now know a fuller story.”² Confederate monuments were created by certain (often women’s organizations, most often white people of a class able to afford the freight) people for specific purposes. Mitch Landrieu, mayor of New Orleans, named the purpose: “The resurgence of white power, enshrined in the 1891 erection of the White League

obelisk, had long lasting impact ...It kept black children out of good schools; it kept black citizens out of jobs, it condemned them to poor housing, terrible health care and poverty."³ That, Landrieu argued, is the very intention of confederate monuments. Confederate monuments assert white supremacy while presenting a nostalgic view of a contested history.

The Civil War definitely qualifies as difficult history, guidelines for which are proposed in an article by Drs. Gross and Terra. Difficult histories are, they argue, central to a nation's history; tend to refute broadly accepted versions of the past or stated national values; may connect with questions or problems facing us in the present; often involve violence, usually collective or state sanctioned; and create disequilibria that challenge existing historical understandings.⁴ Keeping the difficult realities out involve, as an author describing the Confederate Museum in Richmond, Virginia, wrote, the glorification of the gracious past of "charming manners, the art of letter writing, the gift of conversation..."⁵ The Confederate Museum in Richmond, "by portraying slavery as benevolent, the museum justified Jim Crow; by depicting the white South as "solid" the museum called for deference from a discontented working class, by emphasizing military valor and sacrifice, the museum gained sympathy."⁶ Confederate monuments are often soldiers depicted at parade rest. "By focusing on the personal heroism of the common soldier white southerners also hoped to defuse political divisions among themselves in a manner that would create a united racial front in support of white supremacy."⁷ In fact, Confederate monuments, most of the background reading asserted, "reflected that moment of white supremacist ascendancy as much as they did the confederate legacy."⁸

Historians have many different opinions about the disposition of Confederate monuments. Here are the texts retrieved from America: *History and Life*. I will describe them in

three groups—those articles that primarily argued for keeping Confederate Monuments in place, those that argued for removal, and those that proposed means of using them as teaching tools.

2017. After Charlottesville. *Civil War Times* 56, (6): 11.

Boerhout, Laura, and Barry van Driel. 2013. Memory walk: An interaction-oriented project to interrogate contested histories. *Intercultural Education* 24 (3): 211-21.

Cohen-Ferris, Marcie. 2017. Front Porch. *Southern Cultures* 23(3): 1-6.

Curtis, S, W. 2017. Decommissioning Lee: The controversial removal of a prominent New Orleans statue. *American Scholar* 86:97-100.

D. B. S. 2017. Empty Pedestals. *Civil War Times* 56 (5): 26-37.

Furgurson, E. B. 2015. The end of history? Lower the Rebel flag by all means, but let's think hard before we remove all reminders of our painful past. *The American Scholar*, 84(4), 16+.

Gilbert, P. 2017. A monumental decision: What to do with Confederate monuments? *Parks & Recreation* 52:36-39.

Grossman, James. 2016. Whose Memory? Whose Monuments? *Perspectives on History* 54(2), 41-56.

Hamer, Fritz. 2017. Re-examining public memorials: National and International Perspectives. *The Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association*. 21-30.

Morgan, D. 2018. Soldier statues and empty pedestals: Public memory in the wake of the Confederacy. *Material Religion* 14:153-157.

Nelson, K. 2012. In Tongues of Stone": Civil War Monuments and the Evolution of Historical Memory in East Tennessee, 1890-1931. *Journal of East Tennessee History*, 84:40-62.

Parry, Marc. 2017. How should we memorialize slavery? A case study of what happens when research collides with public memory. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Sawchuk, S. 2017. The 'Old South' rises again in history classes. *Education Week* 36:1-12.

Teachout Allen, S. 2017. Teaching the Confederate monument controversy. *Educational Leadership* 75:46-48.

Some of the pieces that, in the whole, were in favor of keeping the monuments in place included short essays solicited by *Civil War Times* editor Dana Shoaf from that magazine's

advisory board: ⁹ The magazine is described in *Magazines for Libraries* as “intended primarily for the general reader and Civil War enthusiast, this publication would also be helpful to high school and junior college students beginning research on a Civil War topic. These short contributions included such sentiments as James Broomall who wrote “The removal of confederate monuments troubles me as much as the destruction of a historic building.” Catherine Clinton argued that removal “won’t create safe spaces or reduce the hostility felt by those resentful of Confederate remnants. “ William Davis argued that “Confederates represent a part of our history.” Garry W. Gallaher contends that “Taking down statues... potentially inhibits a real understanding of our past, warts and all, and can obscure important themes, movements, and eras.” Lesley J. Gordon, by contrast wrote that “Removal helps reach some sort of reckoning with that past in order to embrace a more pluralistic American society.” D. Scott Hartwig advocated for another direction: “Rather than tear down monuments, build new ones, where appropriate, that tell the story of those who struggled bravely for freedom and equality.” Harold Holzer was torn but “I abhor the iconoclastic destruction of art. Neo-Nazis waving the Stars and Bars is a repugnant exercise that deserves condemnation.” Patrick Krick compares removal to Soviets post-purge and ISIS. Michael McAfee was for removal: “They attempted to destroy their nation to defend chattel slavery and from a sense that as white men they were innately superior to all other races. They should be removed.” Joseph McGill acknowledged, “As an African American male, I do not buy into the heritage-not-hate defense of confederate flags and monuments... [but] Can’t sanitize our history, no one would be left on pedestals.” Megan Kate Nelson, uniquely, wrote, “They should be destroyed and their broken pieces left in situ.” Ethan Rafuse’s concern was where would it stop? Thomas V Strain Jr. Sons of Confederate Veterans.

Not the popular opinion they should be removed. Susannah Ural argued for putting them in museums with explanatory commentary.

An article in *The American Scholar* is entitled “The end of history? Lower the Rebel flag by all means, but let's think hard before we remove all reminders of our painful past.” The author states, “To take down every offensive monument in the South willy-nilly reminds me of the wholesale de-Stalinization campaign that I witnessed in the old Soviet Union, and the destruction of ancient monuments by ISIS and Taliban fanatics today.”¹⁰ But he nevertheless argues for retiring the Confederate flag and building new and different monuments. *The American Scholar* is Phi Beta Kappa Society's publication of articles by academics and professional writers about issues that are based in academe but extend outward to the general public” according to their website.

Head of the American History Association (AHA), James Grossman, writes “You can't really erase history. You can erase the presentation of it, you can erase the memory of it, you can erase a particular spin of it, but is it really erasing history?”¹¹ He argues for revision of history and using the monuments as teaching tools. He notes that the AHA still has the Dunning Prize, which is named after a racist scholar. The Dunning School of history, according to John Hope Franklin, former President of the AHA, followed this “unequivocal [and] the most rabid opponent of reconstruction. “Negroes and Scalawags, they claimed, had set the South on a course of social degradation, misgovernment, and corruption. This tragic state of affairs could be changed only by the intervention of gallant men who would put principle above everything else and who, by economic pressure, social intimidation, and downright violence, would deliver the South from Negro rule.”¹² This journal, *Perspectives on History*, is the newsmagazine of the American Historical Association, which states on their website, “Since 1962, we have been the

principal source for news and information about the discipline of history. We offer articles and commentary on research and archives, teaching, digital projects, new books of note, history in the media, public history and museum exhibitions, and more.”

Fritz Hamer wrote about controversies concerning a monument to a gynecologist, Dr. Sims, who operated on slaves without anesthesia, inventing a new treatment for vesicovaginal fistula. The monument to Sims has been removed from Central Park in NY this past year, but in South Carolina, the Department of Health and Environmental Control building is named in Sims' honor, as is a building on the campus of the University of South Carolina. The Sims monument in Columbia is on the grounds of the South Carolina State House. Dr. Hamer argues that “Sims legacy in today’s world deserves evaluation, in his time he achieved an important breakthrough in surgical history that deserves recognition. At the same time it should be publicly recognized that some of his patients were enslaved.”¹³ Fritz makes no mention of the unimaginable cruelty of performing surgery without the available anesthetics. Their website states: “The South Carolina Historical Association publishes a journal, *The Proceedings*, which consists of papers presented at the annual meeting and submitted to the journal for publication consideration. The papers presented at the annual meeting and submitted to the journal are refereed by professional historians prior to selection for publication. Only those papers that meet high standards of scholarship and writing quality are selected for publication.”

In contrast, many writers were in favor of removing confederate monuments from town squares. Those authors who argue in favor of removal included thoughts from Marcie Cohen Ferris who quoted Representative Jenny Anderson Horne, with family connections to Jefferson Davis. This South Carolina House of Representative Congresswoman passionately argued for legislation removing the Confederate flag. "I cannot believe that we do not have the heart in this

body to do something meaningful such as take a symbol of hate off these grounds" ¹⁴ The journal's website states "*Southern Cultures* is an academic quarterly about the history and cultures of the U.S. South, published by UNC Press with the Center for the Study of the American South for readers in the South and beyond."

Another writer, S. W. Curtis asks the question in an essay in *The American Scholar*, "Since when did those who lost a war get their own monuments?" He traces the history of the Lost Cause narrative, with its claims about the slavery "really the mildest in the world" and not resting on "acts of debasement and disenfranchisement, but elevated the African and was in the interest in human improvement." Curtis, a writer and New Orleans transplant, ends with the thought that, as the statue of Lee came down, "while hanging in space a few yards from his pedestal, he finally looked like a man who's lost a war."¹⁵

Parks and Recreation professional Paul Gilbert asserts that monuments were built to underscore white supremacy and Jim Crow and asks readers to acknowledge the cruelty that the monuments represent, created during a time and for a purpose to silently articulate white supremacy and used now to affirm and incite racial hatred. "The park and recreation professionals are trusted community leaders with management over public spaces and expertise at interpretation. We can work with historians and community leaders to help find the right path of our communities to deal with the Confederate monuments in our community."¹⁶ I chose to have one article not found in *America: History and Life* since I was interested in the opinions of the professionals who provide leadership for parks and other public spaces. I did not find an article about confederate monument removal in any city planning journals, interestingly.

One article, entitled "Soldier statues and empty pedestals: Public memory in the wake of the Confederacy," was written by David Morgan, who started and edits the journal *Material*

Religion. His PhD is in art history and he writes about both the advantages and disadvantages of moving monuments to a setting where more explanations can be provided. “Inevitably, the move to a museum places the artifact in a different kind of space, but the task of good museum work includes preserving the ideological settings in which artifacts are crafted and came to be experienced. Civil society need not tolerate public monuments that glorify the heritage of racism. But we should resist the urge to expunge it from the historical record. We need the past to speak powerfully to the present so that we do not forget it.”¹⁷ The 2005 *Library Journal* reviewed this journal: “Its scholarly articles investigate everything from the Sufi arts of urban Senegal to Chinese religions in the American West. Its mission, to explore ‘how religion happens in material culture’ is not for the meek of heart. Academic libraries are urged to add it.”

The essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* article takes for granted the fact that confederate monuments should and have been removed and asks the question how we should memorialize slavery. The essay discusses the disconnect between the real history and the popularized understanding of the ‘Big Easy’ New Orleans. An interview with historian Dartmouth College Historian, Dr. Rashauna Johnson, reveals that slavery never came up in any of her classes, even though New Orleans was at the epicenter of slavery and she attended school there. New Orleans had both a large community of free blacks and the largest slave markets. The lack of monuments to that past speaks loudly. Another historian, Dr. Walter Johnson said, “If you just step back for a second, the whole city is a memorial to slavery... the levee is a slave built levee. The entire economic development of the city was premised upon slavery. All the buildings were built by enslaved people or free people of color.”¹⁸

A great background resource is available at the Southern Poverty Law Center, entitled *Teaching Hard History*. Among the many recommendations are improving textbooks and

curriculum to help students understand the realities of slave life as well as the contributions of African Americans to the cultural patchwork quilt that is America. Their poll of students showed, amongst other things, that only eight percent of students could name slavery as the cause of the Civil War.¹⁹ The report emphasizes the role of greed and cruelty in the story of slavery and argues for students learning about that underlying base motivation and the long-term impact on African-Americans now.

Those writers who specifically addressed using monuments as teaching tools included Boerthout and van Driel, who wrote how too often “Ethnic, religious, language, national and racial identities are to be left on the coat rack at the front door.”²⁰ They describe a Memory Walk project where diverse students are recruited to make short films about monuments to encourage students to consider some questions of themselves and people who live in the neighborhood where the monuments were located. The questions included questions about the style, the purpose of the monuments, whose history is being commemorated, the current relevancy of the monuments, how the residents had learned about the monuments, if they had been. Who’s demonized? Who’s glorified? Who is left out? Students could use monuments to consider the changing and contesting meaning making of monuments and the messages sent and received.

While Nelson’s article “In Tongues of Stone” article doesn’t specifically address how to teach, her work could act as a template to study the evolving creation and meaning-making of monuments. The author traces commercial reasons why monuments in this conflicted part of the country drifted from Union revering to confederate revering in East Tennessee. Immediately after the war, white businessmen felt they could profit by emphasizing Unionist sentiments in order get federal funding and attract northern business people. By 1910 a movement towards

reconciliation had grown, but as industry led to urbanization and “as the cities grew, many East Tennesseans confronted modernization by reinforcing traditional values. The Ku Klux Klan organized klaverns through the region.”²¹ “The various social and economic changes in East Tennessee coalesced to create an atmosphere in which the people the region mourned “the loss of a (perhaps mythical) rural world of Christian faith and social harmony”²² By the 1930s, the United Daughters of Confederacy (UDC) used images of the courageous Confederate soldier, dignified southern lady, and the loyal slave to mold memory in the region.”²³ The author then traces different monuments erected thereafter, and concludes “loss of autonomy and monotonous factory work left East Tennesseans in search of traditions of valor, honor, and glory and the women of the UDS provided this with their images of Confederate memory.”²⁴ While it might be beyond the skill of a high school student to trace the background economic and social history of an areas monuments, it would certainly be a valuable project for them to attempt to undertake. Looking at the monuments with a backdrop of a combined economics/history/civics course cluster would prove very valuable.

Sawchuk’s article “The 'Old South' rises again in history classes” emphasizes the importance of students wrestling with and relying on and reporting out studies based on the evidence. One class of students in Denver is highlighted and in the end, the teacher was “proud that their discussions yielded different, but well-reasoned, arguments. Some of her students favored removing the statues to museums where they could be better contextualized; some favored coupling them with new explanatory plaques or exhibits acknowledging the horrors of slavery. But all of them thought about what it must be like for black residents to walk by or eat lunch in a park featuring a Confederate monument.”²⁵

Waters & Demoiny, in their piece on “Using Civil War monuments for race discussions in secondary history classrooms” argue that researching monuments in class gives them a potentially safe space to talk about race issues in the U.S. Some of their recommendations include student research into: -When monument was created,-by whom (and what was their position in society) –motivation vis-à-vis societal domination –intended audience –government support -what’s left out? -Problematic words or symbols -how is site used today, what rituals occur? -what other people lived and events happened then but are not commemorated?

Stephanie Teachout Allen is a 5th grade teacher and director of diversity and inclusion at New City School in St. Louis, Missouri, had her students interview family members about the meaning of the confederate flag. After that exercise, the students visited a (now removed) Confederate Monument, had a lecture from a local sociology professor and finally met with the Mayor to share their thoughts (which varied considerably) about what should happen to the statue. Her class project demonstrates schools can teach complex and conflicted material to young people, who will have as conflicted responses to and suggestions for the monuments as their elders.

Some of the common themes I saw that, among the scholars who argue for the statues to remain: Removing monuments is removing history; it is desirable to increase contextual signage regardless; a common idea is coupling Confederate monuments to Civil Rights Monuments. Those in favor of removal emphasized monuments’ *intention at creation* was to signal white supremacy; monuments’ ability to wound in the here and now; the monuments disconnect from “real” history as the monuments celebrate an idealized, neutralized soldier fighting for homeland, as opposed to a soldier who in reality was fighting to continue slavery and the exploitation and oppression of Black people. Themes of teaching argued statues can be valuable starting points

for understanding the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Civil Rights history, even with young people. In addition, using Confederate monuments can provide opportunities to learn about civility when arguing contested history.

In *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts*, Sam Wineberg, founder and Executive Director of the Stanford History Education Group, writes

Schools are not training grounds for democracy but the places where democracy is enacted. Either the classroom becomes a site where we learn to talk to one another, or we will suffer the enduring consequences of never having learned to do so. Discussions in such classrooms will inevitably veer into the contentious issues of judgment, conflict, and tension that characterize a free society. This is what Dewey meant when he wrote that schools are not training grounds for democracy but the places where democracy is enacted. Either the classroom becomes a site where we learn to talk to one another, or we will suffer the enduring consequences of never having learned to do so.²⁶

It is mission critical for our young people to be taught about slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the long-term impact of slavery, as well as the ability to respectfully argue about the issues at hand. Jared Diamond's Aspen lecture this pointed to some trends that help explain why the contested monuments result in such violence now -- the trend toward political polarization and the breakdown of compromise and civility generally which he offers many reasons, including the growth of niche media and the increase of communication (anonymous, non-face-to face) that allows people to shoot off opinions without having to respond to the listeners' response.²⁷ Teachers could use these historians opinions to demonstrate that even those with degrees in history and history teaching can offer up different opinions about what should happen to Confederate statues (or anything else). Learning about who made the monuments, who paid for them, who bureaucratically allowed for their positioning, and when in history they were erected will be enlightening. It is harder having 18 year olds think through what is present and especially what is absent and what are the big picture issues about class, power, resources,

messages—but it is may be more possible through studies of local monuments to explore what is truly difficult history, to think through *Cui Bono*, or who benefits.

Some other issues that arose in my mind is the role of the current history teaching and textbooks, which too often tell a sweeping narrative of continuous improvement. Too seldom are students introduced to the complex difficult American history that reflects a multitude of voices and lived experiences of Americans. Among those, women's voices in particular is absent. Why was memorializing the Confederates such a high priority for women's groups? It's noted in most of the texts I studied, but never really explained. The other thought I had was whose work is this? I found, interestingly, no articles from urban studies journals. The parks and recreation folk are probably going to be more involved in those monuments that are in state and local parks, as opposed to town squares. Should historians insert themselves into the city planning agencies or offer themselves up as resources?

What are your thoughts? In everything being written about Confederate monument removal, what is lacking, what is not being discussed?

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