

Reckoning with History

Confederate Monuments in American Cities

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On a Wednesday evening in June 2015, two days before the 150th anniversary of the end of slavery in the United States, a young white man named Dylann Roof entered the South's oldest African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and asked to see the Reverend Clementa Pinckney. The church was the birthplace of the AME denomination and home to the first independent Black congregation in America. In its nearly 200-year history, it had been repeatedly raided, burned to the ground by enslavers fearing revolt, and steadfastly rebuilt, cared for, and defended by its parishioners. Booker T. Washington and Martin Luther King Jr. had spoken from the same pulpit as the forty-one-year-old Reverend Pinckney, who had begun preaching at the tender age of thirteen and had served as a state senator since he was twenty-three. Pinckney welcomed Roof inside and invited him into the basement parish hall where he was leading Bible study.

Roof sat beside Pinckney for nearly an hour in the church parishioners called "Mother Emanuel," listening and at times debating scripture. He eventually became noticeably agitated. When the worshippers finally closed their eyes in prayer, Roof pulled a gun from a bag around his waist and opened fire—first on Pinckney, then on twenty-six-year-old Tywanda Sanders, who had rushed to the pastor's aid and pleaded with Roof to stop. He continued firing on the remaining parishioners, reloading again and again over five terrifying minutes. Roof recited the most vile and pernicious racist tropes as he gunned down his victims, making plain his intention to murder his hosts for the imaginary crime of their Blackness and to martyr himself to the cause of white supremacy. His grand ambition was to ignite a race war—a plan that he reportedly hesitated to execute, "because everyone was so nice to him."¹ By the time Roof turned his gun on himself, nine were fatally wounded, and he had run out of ammunition.² He fled the scene and was arrested the following morning in North Carolina.

Devastated parishioners and Black communities across America did not react as Roof's delusion had led him to hope or expect. Confronted again with the too-familiar phenomenon of racist violence, many gathered in prayer, leaned on one another for strength and courage, and recommitted to the painstaking work of political organizing. From the pulpit of Emanuel AME, just four days after Roof's massacre, the congregation rose in applause as Reverend Norvell Goff praised the law enforcement officers who had responded at the scene and tracked the fugitive down and cheered again as Goff pledged "to hold our elected officials accountable for doing the right thing." Far to the north, at First Corinthian Baptist Church in Harlem, a fellow pastor called for a reckoning with history: "Racism, bigotry, prejudice and hatred are elements woven into the fabric of this country. There can be no healing in this land if we are not honest about who we are."³

President Barack Obama attended Reverend Pinckney’s memorial service and delivered a eulogy, honoring not only the life of the pastor but also the meaning of Black churches as “our beating heart. The place where our dignity as a people is inviolate.”⁴ He led mourners in a rendition of “Amazing Grace.” Seeming to embody that grace, several survivors and bereaved mothers and wives—including Jennifer Pinckney, the pastor’s wife and a local librarian—publicly forgave Roof even in the depths of their grief. “I told him, ‘May God have mercy on your soul,’” said Felicia Sanders, whose son and aunt were killed while she lay over her terrified granddaughter, saving her life. “And I honestly hope God has mercy on his soul.”⁵

Roof’s fantasy of a race war did not come to pass, and a jury eventually sentenced him to death, but in the immediate aftermath of the attack, when photos surfaced of Roof posing with a Confederate flag, a sort of proxy war arose around the symbology of American racism and Civil War history.ⁱ What had been a long-simmering national debate about whether there was any place for Confederate flags and monuments in public spaces at last came to a boil.

Since the end of the Reconstruction era, Southern States and organizations like the Sons of Confederate Veterans had advanced a revisionist Civil War history that sought to refurbish Southern culture and identity with nostalgic and historically inaccurate archetypes: kindly slaveholders inspiring the loyalty of those they enslaved and chivalrous soldiers defending themselves, their wives, and the Southern way of life from the aggression of the Northern States.ⁱⁱ During the decade preceding the church massacre alone, American taxpayers had financially supported Confederate sites, monuments, and organizations to the tune of more than 40 million dollars.⁶

After the shooting in Charleston, citizens in cities and towns across the country called for the removal of Confederate monuments and flags, arguing that the “lost cause of the Confederacy” was nothing to take pride in, and that the persistence of these symbols in public life—outside courthouses, on statehouse grounds, in public parks—only served to whitewash the moral calamity of slavery in America and glorify its defenders. Other citizens rose to defend them, arguing that removing these symbols was no better and perhaps worse, erasing a history that America should not forget. Many local governments appointed commissions to study the issue and make recommendations for the fate of their existing monuments.

ⁱ Roof’s lawyers have appealed his sentence, arguing that he suffered from a variety of mental illnesses and should not have been permitted to represent himself in court. (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/dylann-roof-appeals-death-penalty-south-carolina-church-massacre-n1125341>)

ⁱⁱ The Reconstruction era began in 1863, when the Emancipation Proclamation banning slavery in the Confederate (rebel) states officially went into effect. In 1865, at the end of the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution abolished slavery throughout the nation. The Reconstruction era saw the ratification of two additional constitutional amendments: the Fourteenth Amendment establishing full citizenship and equal protection under the law for “all persons born or naturalized in the United States” and the Fifteenth Amendment guaranteeing (male) suffrage regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Despite pockets of progress in racial equality and the emergence of Black leaders in local, state, and national government, neither of these constitutional guarantees proved an effective deterrent to the white supremacist violence and terror inflicted with impunity on Black people—especially in the Southern States. Following the Reconstruction era, Jim Crow laws institutionalized racial segregation and the systemic disenfranchisement of Black voters throughout the Southern States. These laws remained in effect until the civil rights movement won a series of legal victories in the 1950s and 60s, including the Twenty-fourth Amendment banning poll taxes.

In February 2017, the city council of Charlottesville, Virginia, voted to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate army, from a park named after him. A few months later, four statues came down in New Orleans. In a widely viewed speech, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu stated: “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.”⁷ In June, Charlottesville renamed Lee Park “Emancipation Park,” and on August 11, hundreds of white supremacists descended on the city, chanting racist and anti-Semitic slogans and clashing violently with counter-protesters. On August 12, a twenty-year-old neo-Nazi, James Alex Fields, Jr., drove his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing a young white woman, Heather Heyer, and injuring more than a dozen others. With more white supremacist rallies planned and spontaneous marches against hate cropping up in cities all over America, mayors scrambled to respond. Many who recognized the presence of Confederate monuments in their cities as both offensive and a threat to public safety felt newly compelled or empowered to act, but each confronted a unique set of legal, practical, and political circumstances that complicated the question of what to do about the problem.

Baltimore

While Charlottesville was erupting on that mid-August weekend, Baltimore residents were also making themselves heard. Art activists erected a papier-mâché statue called “Madre Luz” by Pablo Machioli—a pregnant Black woman carrying a child on her back and raising her fist in defiance—in front of Generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson astride their bronze horses. A monument to Confederate sailors and soldiers was doused in red paint. The chief of police warned Mayor Catherine Pugh that activists might tear down these and other monuments themselves, as they had just done in Durham, North Carolina. It had been only two years since Freddie Gray, a young Black man, had suffered a fatal spine injury in police custody, sparking massive and eventually chaotic protests in the city.ⁱⁱⁱ The governor had called in the Maryland National Guard to defend “critical infrastructure”—the first time the state had done so for a civil disturbance since the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.⁸ The risk of escalating violence and unrest set off alarm bells for the mayor.

Pugh’s predecessor, Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, had formed a commission after the AME Church shooting in Charleston to study options for the city’s four Confederate monuments. In its report, the commission wrote that Rawlings-Blake “recognized that it was important to respond to this national debate about Confederate monuments and symbols with an informed and thoughtful approach with the input of scholars, artists, and citizens.”⁹ Commissioners had not been unanimous in their votes, but in January 2016, they recommended that two monuments (the Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monument and the Confederate Women’s Monument) should remain, with funds allocated for “a very serious recontextualization.”¹⁰ The commission also recommended that the city remove two monuments: a bronze likeness of former Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, author of the Dred Scott decision, and the aforementioned Lee-Jackson Monument (to be offered to the National

ⁱⁱⁱ Trial testimony suggested that Gray had been injured when the van driver took a hard turn, but subsequent reporting on the prosecution’s failure to call nine witnesses who claimed they saw police “throw” Gray into the van called this theory into question. (Justine Barron, “Freddie Gray, Five Years Later,” April 23, 2020, *The Appeal*, <https://theappeal.org/freddie-gray-five-years-later/>).

Parks Service for relocation to the historic Chancellorsville Battlefield).^{iv} The commission further advised that, “In order to implement the recommendations made by this Commission, a deliberate and transparent process should be put into place.”¹¹ Mayor Rawlings-Blake did not enact the committee’s recommendations during her remaining term, citing expense and logistical challenges.¹²

Quickly and Quietly

The day after the carnage in Charlottesville, Baltimore City Council voted unanimously to remove all four monuments. Mayor Pugh (who took office in December 2016) acted swiftly and decisively; she pledged publicly to get it done, suggesting they could perhaps be moved to a Confederate cemetery. Some city council members bristled, believing that the statues should be destroyed. “These people were terrorists. They were traitors. Why are we honoring them?” asked Councilman Brandon Scott.¹³ Carolyn Billups, the former president of the Maryland chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy opposed the removal entirely, denying that the monuments had racist connotations, telling reporters, “They were all put up with an honorable intention.”¹⁴

Although Mayor Pugh had announced she would seek the approval of the Maryland Historical Trust before moving the Lee-Jackson Monument, she felt the removal of the statues had become an urgent matter. She put in a call to a sympathetic city contractor, making it clear that she wanted the statues removed but also stressing that the city did not have significant funds allocated for removal. The next day, the contractor drove around to assess the work. When he reported back, the mayor told him she wanted the monuments dismantled that night, ideally between 11:30 pm and 5:00 am, when she knew newsrooms would be quiet. The contractor agreed to do it—and to bill the city only for the cost of labor.^v

At 4:58 am on August 16, the last statue was loaded onto a truck to be relocated to a city-owned lot on the outskirts of Baltimore. The following morning, Pugh answered the press’s questions about whether she’d had the authority to act unilaterally: “. . . what I did was what was right for my city. I didn’t start yesterday,” she said. “. . . I felt that enough speeches had been made. I think that any city that has Confederate statues is concerned about violence occurring in their city.”¹⁵ Pugh was firm in her belief that the statues presented an immediate threat to public safety and confident in her authority to act on that threat. (For statistics on the rise in hate crimes and hate groups since 2014, see Appendix 1.)

Good Morning, Baltimore

Citizens passing by the empty pedestals the next morning expressed mixed views. Many took pride in the mayor’s move. One stated, “I’m shocked and . . . very happy and proud of my city.” Others called it “a great day in the history of Baltimore,” and commended the city for “doing the right thing, moving that thing that represents hate.”¹⁶ Still others wondered pointedly whether the statues were the problem: “Now that it’s gone, what’s going to change?” asked one resident. “The problem is in our hearts and in our minds,” said another. “We need to change that. Taking down all the statues is not

^{iv} The Dred Scott (1857) decision explicitly excluded people of African descent from the rights and privileges of American citizenship. The Battle of Chancellorsville (1893) was the second most deadly battle of the Civil War. General Lee’s Confederate troops won the battle, but General Jackson was badly wounded and died of pneumonia a week after the Union’s retreat.

^v The cost of removing the statues was just under \$20,000. (Source: Ned Oliver, “Baltimore Paid Less Than \$20,000 to Remove Four Confederate Monuments Last Month. So What Does that Mean for Richmond?” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, September 8, 2017.)

going to do that.”¹⁷ Carolyn Billups, defending the monuments, called their removal “an act of lawlessness.”¹⁸ In a letter to the city, the Maryland Historical Trust also contested the legality of the move, saying that a 1984 contract between the Trust and the city gave authority over the statues to the Trust, but trustees pledged to “work cooperatively towards a mutual resolution.”¹⁹

To some degree, Maryland’s history as a state suspended between North and South at the time of the Civil War informed the public reaction. Although Union fighters outnumbered Confederates in Maryland about three to one, slavery remained legal and commonplace across the state at the start of the Civil War. One Annapolis resident wrote to the *Sun* to point out that the state flag includes the Crossland coat of arms, the banner of Maryland’s Confederate soldiers. “It’s actually an awesome thing to see the reunification of the North and South on our flag” she wrote. “I truly hope the denizens of political correctness remain blissfully ignorant about our flag’s history or it too could go the way of the statues.”²⁰

Lexington

A bit further south, in Lexington, Kentucky, two bronze Confederate officers, John C. Breckinridge and John Hunt Morgan, had stood on pedestals outside the old Fayette County courthouse in a neighborhood called Cheapside for over one hundred years. Morgan, a general nicknamed “the Thunderbolt of the Confederacy,”²¹ and Breckinridge, former vice president to James Buchanan and the last secretary of war for the Confederate States, stood near to a plaque erected in 2003 describing a crucial detail of the site’s history:^{vi}

SLAVERY IN FAYETTE CO.: On the N.E. corner of the Fayette County Courthouse lawn stood the whipping post established in 1847 to punish slaves for such offenses as being on the streets after 7 p.m. Fayette Co. was one of the largest slave-holding counties in Kentucky. By 1860, one in four residents the city of Lexington were slaves.

CHEAPSIDE SLAVE AUCTION BLOCK: African Americans were sold as slaves at Cheapside Auction Block on the public square in the 19th century. Lexington was the center of slave trading in Ky, by the late 1840s and served as a market for selling slaves farther south. Thousands of slaves were sold at Cheapside, including children who were separated from their parents.²²

A little over a week after the massacre in Charleston, someone spray-painted “BLACK LIVES MATTER” across the granite pedestal beneath Morgan. Though he promised to investigate the vandalism, Mayor Jim Gray responded sympathetically: “The time has come for us to reconsider our Confederate memorials, and I am committed to laying a path forward that acknowledges our history while respecting diversity and inclusion.”²³ Two weeks later, community members gathered at the Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning to discuss the issue. In his introductory remarks, the mayor stated that at the time of the Civil War, “Lexington was a city divided. [. . .] In my view, [the memorials] should at a very basic level honor and pay tribute to our shared values [. . .]. And if they don’t, then how do we respect the history of their creation but adapt and adjust to reflect contemporary standards and shared values?”²⁴ He announced that he had asked the Urban County Arts Review Board (the Board) to

^{vi} The plaque was donated to the city by alumni of the Lexington chapter of the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity.

consult with experts and the public and make recommendations. Though most present were in favor of addressing the monuments in some way, calls for their removal from Cheapside were scarce.

Accordingly, Mayor Gray felt that adding context to the monuments might be a satisfactory solution. “At that time, I think, my view of it was that these statues had been so much a part of the visual history of the city.” He explained, “My feeling [was] that we could arguably place a plaque at the statues that would illustrate the real and truthful history of the men who they represented.”²⁵ The same month that the mayor initiated the review, vandals destroyed the plaque describing Cheapside’s history as the site where many Black Kentuckians’ ancestors had been bought, sold, and tortured. In September, the review board invited members of the public to city hall to weigh in on their findings. Most of the speakers opposed removing the statues.

A young musician, DJ, and history buff named DeBraun Thomas was among the few in attendance who felt it was time for Morgan and Breckinridge to go. “The great-great-granddaughter of John C. Breckinridge was at this meeting talking about her great-great-grandfather,” he said. “So, when I got up there and gave my three minutes, I was like, ‘Well yo, I’m the great-grandson of a slave.’”²⁶ Other members of the public suggested relocating them, adding statues of figures from African American history, or making improvements to an updated version of the site marker.

In January 2016, having consulted with experts as well as the public, the Board presented its conclusion: the monuments were fundamentally incompatible with the site on which they stood and should be relocated. However, as Board Chair Georgia Henkel noted ruefully in her letter to the mayor, the Board had been informed in November that an ongoing renovation of the former courthouse created a complication: “You can imagine our collective disappointment when we were told in the middle of our final meeting on the issue, that the lawn of the courthouse and all of its assets have to remain in place in order to meet the criteria for enhanced tax credits on historic properties.”²⁷ The city’s director of historic preservation had informed the Board that an exception to this rule could be made only in the case of “extremely problematic” features of the site.^{vii} Henkel continued, “It is the opinion of the Urban County Arts Review Board, that these confederate sculptures as they now stand are significantly problematic, as they do not provide a fair and honest representation of Lexington’s history.”²⁸ While the Board members had been advised to make their judgments without considering the logistics and finances of the courthouse renovations, some seemed to fear that City Hall would use the issue as cover to delay action or keep the statues on site.²⁹

Take Back Cheapside

In February, the mayor’s office announced that it would not be relocating the monuments. Plans for new signage or additional monuments at the site were put on hold while construction at the old courthouse went forward. “It’s a poor reflection on Lexington,” said Henkel. “We will watch and wait, and this issue may come up again in the next few years.”³⁰

^{vii} Because the statues were not part of the original lawn, it was later determined that relocation would not compromise the tax credits.

Early that July, in back-to-back incidents, police officers were filmed shooting two Black men to death at close range—Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota.^{viii} DeBraun Thomas decided it was time to act: “At that point, I’m just done. I’m just tired. I can’t just keep making a Facebook status every time this happens,” he said in a radio interview. “I decided I needed to do something.”³¹ He and his friend Russell Allen, also a musician, worked with an experienced community organizer to turn people out for a “flash mob” rally near the monuments, where they led protesters around the bustling public square, chanting, “Take back Cheapside! Black lives matter! Black history matters!” through megaphones.

The Take Back Cheapside movement rallied and tabled at events and gathered support from allies like the Kentucky Workers League, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, and Lexington chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ). Local artists, lawyers, and businesses offered additional support. Take Back Cheapside established a three-point platform: remove the statues, bring back the site marker, and “open up a dialogue as to how to make that space more inclusive for all of Lexington.”³²

“Lexington has lots of stories of Black excellence that get swept under the rug,” Thomas pointed out, citing Lexington-born Alfred Francis Russell who went on to become president of Liberia. Maybe there was room for some of these untold stories at Cheapside.^{ix} The son of a “mover and a shaker” who worked in city government, Thomas understood “process has to happen first, before you can really push to enact change. . . . Being mad is fine but if you’re just mad, and not channeling that rage, it’s not going to do anything. So, my thought was, ‘What can I do to take this rage and push it toward something that’s actually meaningful and productive?’”³³

“The Take Back Cheapside advocates were very patient and very persistent,” Mayor Gray said. “They would call for a meeting with me about every two months. They also met with the police chief. They were making their rounds. They were meeting with council members.” He praised the group as a masterclass in public advocacy. “There was no belligerence. They were individually meeting with us and illustrating and sharing that there was only one resolution to this, and that was to remove these statues from these grounds.”

As work continued at the courthouse, the mayor also fielded calls and letters from defenders of the monuments, but the more he thought about the message it would send to keep the statues where they were, on the city’s “front porch,” the more convinced he became that the statues would have to go: “We were going to open this newly renovated 125-year-old building with a visitor center on the first floor. As the public comment and awareness was dialed up, the irreconcilable dilemma really continued to present itself to me. How can you keep these statues on these grounds and present a welcoming invitation into our city?” Chief of Police Mark Barnard recalled one Black pastor telling him that he avoided walking past the statues because of what they represented to him. The pastor had

^{viii} Though both men were in possession of a firearm at the time police killed them, videos and eyewitness reports offered no evidence of either man threatening officers.

^{ix} In August 2020, the Urban County Council renamed Cheapside Park “Henry A. Tandy Centennial Park” after Henry Tandy, a freed African American mason who laid the foundation for the old courthouse and many other Lexington landmarks. According to an email from DeBraun Thomas in November 2020, “The signage has yet to change, but we’re hoping to have an official unveiling/dedication of the park at a time when it is safe to do so.”

suggested to the chief that if the city were to keep the statues, it should move them to a location where visitors would have to make a deliberate effort to see them. Barnard described watching the mayor shift his point of view, “from being just a statue issue to a moral issue.” As Gray explained, “I felt at the end of the day, the Take Back Cheapside people were correct.”

The mayor and his staff began working behind the scenes on a plan to relocate the statues. They initially approached the privately-owned Lexington Cemetery, but the cemetery board refused, having no interest in courting controversy. The mayor then began working on a plan to move the monuments to a city-owned military park known as Veterans Park: “We would have created a walk of monuments. We already have a World War II monument there. We have a Korean War monument, a Vietnam monument, so we were thinking these two statues would rest nicely there.”

The Cemetery Is the Only Place

By August 2017, the mayor had decided to announce his intention to remove and relocate the statues. “And then,” he said, “Charlottesville erupted”—three days before his planned statement. From his golf club in New Jersey, President Trump made a statement blaming the violence on “many sides.” Gray decided to announce his decision to relocate the statues right away: “Before we got the questions of, ‘Jim Gray, where are you? Why are you not saying something?’ we had to make a decision.” White supremacist groups responded to Gray’s announcement by threatening to target Lexington next.

DeBraun Thomas and Russell Allen, the public faces of opposition to the monument, “had to couch surf and, you know, disappear for a little while.”³⁴ Thomas recalled the moment as surreal: “It’s a very weird feeling when you call the police chief to say you’ve had threats on your life and have them say, ‘We know.’”³⁵ A network of allies and city police mobilized to ensure that the Take Back Cheapside activists were safe, watching and listening for signs of danger, and staying in constant contact. The national and international press descended on the city. “All of a sudden Lexington was put in the spotlight,” Mark Barnard recalled. “I remember us saying, ‘We’ve got to do it, and do it quick.’”

“But then we couldn’t,” the mayor explained. Although the urban county council voted unanimously in favor of relocation, there were two major obstacles. First, Veterans Park did not want the statues. “What we didn’t anticipate,” said Gray, “was that veterans, Black and white, were vigorously opposed to putting these men who they considered traitors in Veterans Park. And the neighborhood was against it because the neighbors were fearful of the controversy—that the white nationalists would come to their neighborhood.” Second, the statues appeared to be under the jurisdiction of a military heritage commission that wanted them to remain where they stood. The mayor recalled his chief of staff’s blunt assessment of the situation: “If the cemetery board doesn’t accept the statues, we’re f—d.”

As tensions rose in Lexington, Gray knew he needed allies. He reached out to faith leaders, former mayors and elected officials, and members of the business community. With these allies, the mayor’s office began campaigning publicly and privately for the statues to be relocated to the cemetery, which held the remains of many Confederate fighters, including Morgan and Breckinridge. “I didn’t ask people to come see me as mayor,” Gray said. “I went to see them. I went to their homes. We wrote

letters. We had former mayors write op-eds in the paper, saying the cemetery is the only place to put it.”

Jamie Emmons, the mayor’s chief of staff, described the next few months as “just constantly filled with meetings and conversations and trying to figure out a way to make this work.” The mayor published an open letter to the cemetery board: “The Lexington Cemetery is a prestigious site . . . that respectfully honors the Civil War soldiers who are buried there. Notably, Fayette County’s two other Military Heritage Commission designated Civil War monuments are located in The Lexington Cemetery. . . . [T]he Kentucky Military Heritage Commission will likely view The Lexington Cemetery as an appropriate site for relocation. In fact, it may likely be the only site in Fayette County that will be received in such favorable light.”³⁶

The board voted to accept the statues after a private meeting with Mayor Gray on September 11, 2017, but the problem of the Military Heritage Commission remained. Over the next month, in search of a loophole, the city and Take Back Cheapside explored legal arguments, including the possibility that the statues violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. While researching the issue, a city employee discovered that former mayor Teresa Isaac had approved a private citizen’s application to register the statues with the commission without seeking the requisite approval of the urban county council. On the afternoon of October 17, Kentucky Attorney General Andy Beshear invalidated the former mayor’s decision. Mayor Gray, Emmons, and Chief Barnard arranged for the statues to come down that evening, 103 years to the day after the Morgan statue was erected. “It was not in the middle of the night, and I think everyone appreciated that,” said Emmons.

Private individual donations and a local contractor’s donated equipment and labor covered the cost of removal, and the city offered to pay for new bases for the statues and security cameras at the cemetery. Thomas and Allen of Take Back Cheapside, flanked by police, spoke to reporters following the generals’ eviction from Cheapside. “All it takes is for one person to be fed up with what’s happening,” said Allen, “and you just mobilize. . . . You find people who are on your side and you . . . make your government work for you.”³⁷ As Emmons pointed out, however, “Just to illustrate both sides of this coin, some African American ministers did not want us to relocate the statues. They wanted us to melt the statues.” Instead, the generals were moved to the graveyard without fanfare. “It’s one of my proudest moments after thirty-two years in law enforcement,” said Chief Barnard, “to work through that process. And to do the right thing versus the political thing.”

“Mayor Gray’s resolution was unlike any other in the nation that I’m aware of. The Breckinridge and Morgan statues have been relocated, not destroyed or hidden in storage, and are now in full public view where the two men are buried,” said Emmons. “And most importantly, thanks to Chief Barnard and his officers, no lives were lost nor was anyone injured during the process.” Thomas echoed these sentiments: “Once the mayor said, ‘These are going to go,’ he didn’t back down. No one was hurt—because he was in 100 percent and everyone else in the administration was following his lead.”³⁸

Charleston

In June 2015, after the shooting at Charleston’s Emanuel AME Church, the American flag and the South Carolina state flag sailed at half-mast over the Capitol dome in Columbia for nine days in honor of the nine victims. On the grounds nearby, however, the Confederate flag still flew over the South Carolina Confederate Monument.

Fifteen years earlier, over 46,000 Americans had participated in a march against that flag organized by Charleston’s then-Mayor Joe Riley. Mayor Riley, who served in the role from 1975 to 2016, had marched arm-in-arm with local Black leaders, leading protesters 120 miles on foot from Charleston to Columbia in a five-day trek to demand the removal of the flag from the statehouse. Lawmakers at the time set out a compromise—the South Carolina Heritage Act of 2000—which relocated the flag from the dome to the monument, but prohibited any future “removal, changing, or renaming of any local or state monument, marker, memorial, school, or street erected or named in honor of the Confederacy or the civil rights movement” without the approval of two-thirds of both houses of the state legislature.³⁹

Initially hoisted atop the Capitol in 1961, on the centennial of the Civil War and in the thick of the civil rights movement, the flag that now flew over the monument could not legally be moved, or even lowered, without meeting this two-thirds threshold. Ten days after the massacre, on June 27, 2015, Bree Newsome, an artist and filmmaker—and the daughter of the former dean of the Divinity School at Howard University, one of America’s most prestigious historically Black colleges—scaled the flagpole on Capitol grounds. A white male accomplice acted as lookout while she took down the flag and made her way back down, reciting scripture before peacefully surrendering to police. Thirteen hours of debate in the state legislature ensued, and on July 6, it finally reached the two-thirds threshold needed to remove the flag from Capitol grounds. “The symbols represent an ideology,” Newsome told a reporter from the *Washington Post* in 2020.^x “I don’t see a scenario where we have resolved racism . . . [while] we still have monuments to the Confederacy up. . . . The shift in the culture and the shift in the mind-set precedes the shift in the law. That’s always been the case.”⁴⁰

Over his long tenure as mayor, Riley had been a champion of civil rights. He had famously hung a portrait of Martin Luther King Jr. at City Hall immediately upon entering office.⁴¹ Even after stepping down, he continued working to realize his vision for a world-class museum of African American history in Charleston at the waterfront site where traffickers forced somewhere between four and eight million enslaved Africans into America for sale.⁴² Riley’s leadership had helped steady the city and bring the community together in the immediate aftermath of the shooting. But it fell to the new mayor, John Tecklenburg, to guide the grieving city through a reckoning with its ubiquitous reminders of its racist history. As a candidate in 2015, Tecklenburg described what he saw as both an opportunity and a responsibility “to seize this sense of unity and work on these issues.”⁴³ The Reverend Joe Darby, a leader in the Black community, voiced some skepticism, pointing out that “raging politeness” was a Charlestonian affliction not easily overcome by even the best intentions.⁴⁴

^x Newsome later married and changed her last name to Newsome-Bass.

Where Do You Stop?

Tecklenburg, who had participated in the march against the flag in 2000, was cautious about pushing for the removal of statues, not only because of the major hurdle of the Heritage Act, but also out of a concern about what he saw as the dangers of erasing painful history. “Kind of a guiding thought or principle in my thinking,” he explained, “was that by complete removal of history, you remove part of the story. You remove the opportunity to expose folks to the story of the past—of how abhorrent slavery and racism are and were. You know, you don’t want to vanilla-sugarcoat everything.”⁴⁵ Moreover, he wondered, “Where do you stop? Every other street [is named for a Confederate soldier]. Charleston is rich in our history, and so, you add all that together, and what I prefer to do and have been doing, is tell the whole story about our racist past and our slave-owning past.”

After Charlottesville, like his counterparts in Baltimore, Lexington, and other cities, Tecklenburg pushed for changes. The city had been working with designers on a memorial at the AME Church, and as Tecklenburg showed the artists around town, the inadequacy of the history Charleston offered its visitors felt like an indictment.⁴⁶ He sent a letter to the chair of the City of Charleston History Commission, which stated: “I feel that adding to the historical story enables us to more fully understand and learn from our past. This approach is also a practical reality as the state legislature prohibits the removal of certain historical markers and artifacts without legislative approval.”⁴⁷ His recommendations started with the 115-foot monument to John C. Calhoun located in the center of Charleston, not far from Emanuel AME. (For images of the monument, see Appendix 2.)

Though Calhoun—former US secretary of state, senator, and vice president—died before the start of the Civil War, he laid the groundwork for it, rebranding slavery as not a “necessary evil” but a “positive good,” and arguing for the states’ right to nullify any federal laws they deemed unconstitutional. (For an excerpt of Calhoun’s “positive good” speech, see Appendix 3.) Tecklenburg requested “a plaque to be written by the History Commission (with public input) and approved by City Council” that would identify Calhoun and describe “his views on racism, slavery, and white supremacy.” The mayor also called for:

- further plaques and explanatory information to be written and erected at other relevant monuments (e.g., Wade Hampton, Defenders of Fort Sumter), public places, parks, or buildings as determined by the Commission and City Council
- an online educational component to be created and posted on the city’s website to explain the historical significance of race, racism, slavery, and white supremacy with regard to city monuments, places, or buildings
- improved access and information to the Denmark Vesey Monument, including wayfinding signage and internet information
- the creation of a significant African American monument at White Point Gardens and/or Riley Waterfront Park as recommended by the Commission and approved by City Council, such as a monument to the First South Carolina Volunteers, escaped slaves from South Carolina who served—at the risk of being hanged—as Union soldiers
- the consideration of adding other appropriate markers and memorials, particularly to the contributions of civil and human rights leaders of Charleston’s history⁴⁸

Over the next year, the mayor was able to make and recommend a number of changes along these lines. He added signage directing visitors to the statue of Denmark Vesey, an early leader in the AME Church whose preaching and strategic recruitment efforts inspired thousands of enslaved people to follow him into what would have been the boldest and bloodiest insurrection by enslaved people in US history.^{xi} (The plot was discovered, and Vesey and forty other men were hanged as conspirators in 1822.) At a park named for Confederate Colonel Wade Hampton, a marker commemorating the first Memorial Day, which honored Union soldiers lost during the Civil War, had become obscured by a flower bed. “I had the plaque recast on a podium,” Tecklenburg explained, “so that it got out of the dirt and people could see it.” He also made plans to place a plaque at the former site of a “workhouse” in the city where, he explained, “If you owned a slave and you didn't want to punish them, all you had to do was turn them over to the city of Charleston. We'd punish them for you. We had set, in our city ordinances, a menu of prices: so much to chain your slave, so much to whip him, so much to feed him.” This site was particularly haunting to the mayor. “That story really gets me,” he said. “It's really crazy that the city was in the business of punishing slaves.”

What the Man Said

The history commission proposed new language for the Calhoun Monument in November 2017. The new text read, in part: “This statue to John C. Calhoun (1782-1850) is a relic of the crime against humanity, the folly of some political leaders and the plague of racism. It remains standing today as a grave reminder that many South Carolinians once viewed Calhoun as worthy of memorialization even though his political career was defined by his support of race-based slavery. Historic preservation, to which Charleston is dedicated, includes this monument as a lesson to future generations.”⁴⁹

Some commissioners, including a city council member, objected to this language, voicing doubt about calling a state-sanctioned practice “a crime against humanity” and calling the tone “inflammatory.”⁵⁰ In January, a revised version that did not reference “a crime against humanity” or “the plague of racism” went to city council for a vote.⁵¹ Of the thirteen city council members, two voted no on the language and eleven voted to defer a decision.⁵² Later that month, a group of citizens showed up at city council to oppose any changes to the monument. The four Black members of the council also indicated that they would not support new signage with the watered-down language the Commission proposed.⁵³ As one commentator from the African American Intellectual History Society noted, “The bigger problem with contextualization . . . is that it assumes that the architecture and opulence of the monument itself are not the problem; that additional words or the right words can remediate the monument’s aesthetic power and message.”⁵⁴ At the end of the January 23rd council meeting, the mayor read a letter from a local history professor and a civil rights attorney asking the council to establish a “city-sponsored and monitored action initiative” to learn more about citizen perspectives on the monument and its signage over the coming year.⁵⁵

In June 2018, after a four-hour city council meeting, the Charleston City Council narrowly approved a resolution apologizing for its role in promoting and sustaining slavery and pledging to work towards racial equality. Mayor Tecklenburg made an impassioned case for the need to pass the resolution, detailing the myriad ways the city participated in and benefited from slavery. Black council members

^{xi} The Denmark Vesey Monument was erected in 2014.

were split on the resolution, which called for creating an “office of racial reconciliation” among other items.⁵⁶ At least one felt it did not offer enough concrete action to lift the economic position of Black people in Charleston.^{xii}

Apology notwithstanding, it was not lost on anyone paying attention that John C. Calhoun still held pride of place in the city’s center. In trying to address the 115-foot elephant in the room, Mayor Tecklenburg found himself up against not only the Heritage Act, but also the fact that the city did not own Marion Square. The property on which Calhoun stood belonged to the Washington Light Infantry, the nation’s oldest active militia. “It’s in our lease that we have to get their permission, and I would not expect them to be amenable. It’s almost like you’re hog-tied. If you wanted to remove this particular statue, you would need the permission of both the owner of the park and the state government,” Tecklenburg explained, “and I have considered that, on this one statue. I felt, on occasion, ‘Just pull the damn thing down and let’s get rid of it. It’s the right thing to do.’” But, he reasoned, “I try to take a longer view of the importance of telling uncomfortable stories sometimes, and I think if we’re going to learn from our past and our history, we can’t cover it up.” As for the signage, Tecklenburg said, “My latest thought is, rather than to write up something about him, is to just quote him directly. Don’t make any observation; just tell people what the man said.”

^{xii} The median income for Black households in Charleston is roughly half that of white households.

Appendices

Appendix 1 US Statistics on Hate

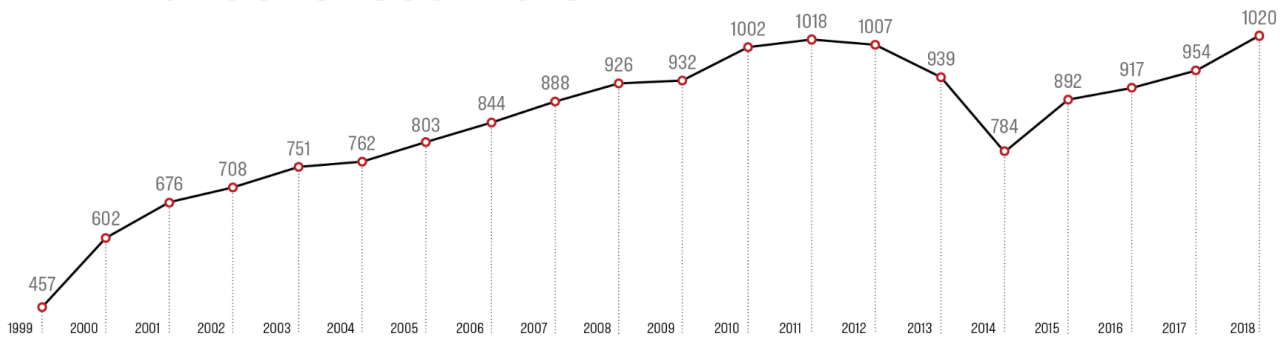
As of November 2018, hate crimes in the US had risen for three consecutive years. The FBI defines hate crimes as “crimes in which the perpetrators acted based on a bias against the victim’s race, color, religion, or national origin,” as well as crimes “based on biases of actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or gender.”

| | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 |
|--|-------|-------|-------|
| Total hate crime incidents | 5,818 | 6,063 | 7,106 |
| Total number of individuals victimized | 7,121 | 7,509 | 8,493 |
| Total number of known offenders | 5,475 | 5,727 | 6,307 |
| Percentage of hate crimes motivated by race/ethnicity/ancestry bias | 56.9 | 57.5 | 58.1 |

Source: FBI Uniform Crime Report⁵⁷

The number of hate groups also rose steadily after 2014, reaching an all-time high in 2018.

HATE GROUPS 1999–2018



Source: Southern Poverty Law Center⁵⁸ Used with permission.

Appendix 2 John C. Calhoun Monument in Charleston, South Carolina

Photo by Andy Hunter. Source: <https://www.scpictureproject.org/wp-content/uploads/calhoun-monument.jpg>. Used with permission.



Image by Ron Cogswell on July 9, 2012, accessed at flickr.com. Image cropped. Used under Creative Commons license.

Appendix 3 Excerpt from John C. Calhoun's Speech on Slavery as a "Positive Good," Delivered on the Senate Floor, February 6, 1837⁵⁹

We of the South will not, cannot, surrender our institutions. To maintain the existing relations between the two races, inhabiting that section of the Union, is indispensable to the peace and happiness of both. It cannot be subverted without drenching the country in blood, and extirpating one or the other of the races. Be it good or bad, [slavery] has grown up with our society and institutions, and is so interwoven with them that to destroy it would be to destroy us as a people. But let me not be understood as admitting, even by implication, that the existing relations between the two races in the slaveholding States is an evil:—far otherwise; I hold it to be a good, as it has thus far proved itself to be to both, and will continue to prove so if not disturbed by the fell spirit of abolition. I appeal to facts. Never before has the black race of Central Africa, from the dawn of history to the present day, attained a condition so civilized and so improved, not only physically, but morally and intellectually.

In the meantime, the white or European race, has not degenerated. It has kept pace with its brethren in other sections of the Union where slavery does not exist. It is odious to make comparison; but I appeal to all sides whether the South is not equal in virtue, intelligence, patriotism, courage, disinterestedness, and all the high qualities which adorn our nature.

But I take higher ground. I hold that in the present state of civilization, where two races of different origin, and distinguished by color, and other physical differences, as well as intellectual, are brought together, the relation now existing in the slaveholding States between the two, is, instead of an evil, a good—a positive good. I feel myself called upon to speak freely upon the subject where the honor and interests of those I represent are involved. I hold then, that there never has yet existed a wealthy and civilized society in which one portion of the community did not, in point of fact, live on the labor of the other. Broad and general as is this assertion, it is fully borne out by history. This is not the proper occasion, but, if it were, it would not be difficult to trace the various devices by which the wealth of all civilized communities has been so unequally divided, and to show by what means so small a share has been allotted to those by whose labor it was produced, and so large a share given to the non-producing classes. The devices are almost innumerable, from the brute force and gross superstition of ancient times, to the subtle and artful fiscal contrivances of modern. I might well challenge a comparison between them and the more direct, simple, and patriarchal mode by which the labor of the African race is, among us, commanded by the European. I may say with truth, that in few countries so much is left to the share of the laborer, and so little exacted from him, or where there is more kind attention paid to him in sickness or infirmities of age. Compare his condition with the tenants of the poor houses in the more civilized portions of Europe—look at the sick, and the old and infirm slave, on one hand, in the midst of his family and friends, under the kind superintending care of his master and mistress, and compare it with the forlorn and wretched condition of the pauper in the poorhouse. But I will not dwell on this aspect of the question; I turn to the political; and here I fearlessly assert that the existing relation between the two races in the South, against which these blind fanatics are waging war, forms the most solid and durable foundation on which to rear free and stable political institutions. It is useless to disguise the fact.

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