



The Southern Delaware Alliance for Racial Justice

... Ending racism and its corrosive consequences

July 20, 2022

Via Email

Hon. William West
Mayor

Hon. Christina Diaz-Malone
Member, Town Council

Hon. Angela Townsend
Member, Town Council

Hon. Sue Barlow
Member, Town Council

Hon. Pinuel Barrett
Member, Town Council

Town of Georgetown
37 The Circle
Georgetown, DE 19947

Re: Great Fund Request - Georgetown Historical Society (2022-06-23)

Dear Mayor and Members of the Town Council:

The Southern Delaware Alliance for Racial Justice ("The Alliance") provides the attached information in further support of its request that you deny the request for public money in the Great Fund Request by the Georgetown Historical Society ("Historical Society") (2022-06-23) which is on your July 25, 2022, agenda. This information supplements The Alliance's earlier letter to you on this topic.

In a July 20, 2022, front page story (text attached), the Washington Post reported that the proper curation of the actual history of Richmond, Virginia, prompted by the removal of Confederate memorials, "opened the flood gates of history, such that curiosity now flows freely through the whole of the city, enlarging not just the scope of what is considered 'historical,' but the city itself." The article goes on to state that:

Richmond proves to the nation that our larger cultural divide over race is manageable, that it is possible to grapple with myths without erasing history and to empower new voices without replacing old ones.

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The article notes that in 1903, the “propriety of placing [a statute of Robert E.] Lee, a traitor, in the Capitol” was questioned with a “Union veterans’ group representative [saying] it would ‘put a premium on treason.’” A congressman decried “the moral equivalence between those ‘who fought on the side of the Union and those who fought against it.’”

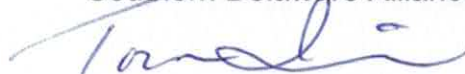
The Post article notes that the removal of the Jim Crow era Confederate “memorials” has resulted in recent expansion of Richmond’s properly curated history and museums which have been “expanded, amended and reordered” with nothing being erased. It further points out that the “bustle of recent historical activity in Richmond highlights the idea of expansion as a riposte to false claims of ‘erasure’ or ‘replacement’ that have dogged debates about icons and race.”

The entire article can be found at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2022/07/19/richmond-confederate-memorials-history/> ; it contains many pictures that are not reproduced in the attached text only version.

Richmond’s renaissance is an example of a process that can be replicated in Georgetown and Sussex County. That is what public, taxpayer, monies can assist. Please deny the Historical Society’s request.

Thank you for your consideration.

Southern Delaware Alliance for Racial Justice



Tom Irvine
Chair, History Committee

Richmond tore down its statues — and revealed a new angle on history

After the 2020 removal of Confederate memorials, museums provide a place to confront the ugly past and find a way forward

Perspective by [Philip Kennicott](#)

Senior art and architecture critic

July 19, 2022 at 5:49 p.m. EDT

IN RICHMOND —

Old Jeff Davis now lies on his back, his head bashed in, his right arm loose in its socket, his bronze pelt covered in pink and yellow paint, with scraps of tissue paper stuck to his lapel and collar. From 1907 to June 10, 2020, the people of Richmond looked up at this statue, set on a high plinth beneath a towering column on Monument Avenue during the height of Jim Crow racism.

Today, they look down on him, just another object on display at the Valentine, a local history museum that also houses the studio where artist Edward Valentine sculpted this and other icons of the Lost Cause, which glorified the Confederacy and corrupted American history, education and politics down to the moment we inhabit today.

Nearby, the museum has posted a history of how the statue became an increasingly intolerable symbol during the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. In the summer of 2020, after the murder of George Floyd by a policeman in Minneapolis, protesters toppled it to the ground.

Across town, at the [Virginia Museum of History and Culture \(VMHC\)](#), another Lost Cause icon sculpted by Valentine is on view. On Dec. 21, 2020, after a request by Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam (D), the bronze figure of Robert E. Lee [was removed from Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol](#), where it had represented the Commonwealth since 1909.

Today, it stands in a darkened, formal chamber of the VMHC, which reopened on May 14 after a 19-month transformative renovation and expansion of its exhibit spaces. The museum inhabits a sprawling complex, the oldest wing of which opened in 1921 as a shrine to the Lost Cause by the now-defunct Confederate Memorial Institute. The VMHC has preserved the mural room from that original shrine, its walls covered with heroic and hyperbolic Lost Cause imagery, sanctifying the defenders of slavery and treason. Lee and the murals have been recontextualized with interpretive signage that explains their role in perpetuating the lies of the Lost Cause.

Since the Confederate memorials of Monument Avenue began coming down two years ago — part of a national reckoning with racist, offensive and historically false iconography — Richmond has emerged as a locus for innovative public history. The display of Edward Valentine's statues in two different institutions points the way forward for reinscribing ugly symbols into a larger and ongoing narrative about racism. The renovation and expansion of the history museum foreground geographical and cultural diversity to create common ground for confronting the state's ugly history not just of slavery and racism, but Native American dispossession. And across the city, vigorous groups with strong community roots have grown into formidable new voices for explicating a larger, more textured history of Richmond, beyond its Confederate past.

It is almost as if the removal of the statues from Monument Avenue opened the flood gates of history, such that curiosity now flows freely through the whole of the city, enlarging not just the scope of what is considered "historical," but the city itself. With Monument Avenue just another boulevard in the center of town, Richmond itself feels bigger. And as its own sense of history expands, Richmond proves to the nation that our larger cultural divide over race is manageable, that it is possible to grapple with myths without erasing history and to empower new voices without replacing old ones.

"We are in this really incredible moment right now," says Bill Martin, director of the Valentine, which is using the display of the Jefferson Davis statue to query its visitors about the role of public art and the future disposition of the removed statues. He sees this moment as an unprecedented opportunity for collaboration. "There are so many of us working together on weird projects, and we all like each other. We show up, we help promote each other's projects."

Among those projects are light projections, including of enslaved people onto the walls of the "White House of the Confederacy," where Davis lived. With support from the Mellon Foundation and in partnership with the Valentine, a group called Reclaiming the Monument, founded during the George Floyd protests, is now expanding its reach with projects throughout Richmond. Also funded by the Mellon Foundation is the JXN Project, which is working to reconstruct an 18th-century house once owned by Abraham Peyton Skipwith, a Black man born enslaved and later emancipated, who became the first known Black homeowner in 1793 in what is now Jackson Ward. The JXN Project has also developed an extensive website, built a robust lecture program and researched deeply into the origins and history of Jackson Ward, created in

1871 to gerrymander and nullify the voting power of Black residents.

“Everywhere we look there is a grass-roots group that has a historical component,” says Rob Havers, head of the Richmond-based American Civil War Museum, a collection of sites that includes the White House of the Confederacy and the Tredegar Iron Works. That may be a group looking to change a street name or erect a history marker for something well known locally but not otherwise acknowledged, or a group organizing walking tours of neighborhoods that played a key role in arts and culture or the civil rights movement. “There is a real impetus and energy, and if you are engaged in public history, the more history the better,” says Havers.

‘Seen at eye level’

At the Valentine, it’s striking to confront the Jefferson Davis statue at close range. It isn’t a compelling likeness or work of art, but details that were all but invisible when it was elevated on a plinth are now easily legible. Inscribed on the column on which Davis rests his left hand is the word “Jamestown” and the date “1776,” connecting the leader of the Confederacy to the origins of English settlement in America and the Declaration of Independence — an appropriation of history by a politician who felt it was more fundamentally American to defend slavery than to accept the results of a free and democratic election.

The official label for the statue is telling: “Jefferson Davis Statue, 1907 bronze with 2020 paint and tissue.” Thus, the paint and tissue paper are interpreted not as damage, but as historical accretions to an object that continues to evolve.

At the VMHC, the Lee statue sits directly on the floor. “You see it at a height equal to you,” says Joseph Rogers, the museum’s manager of partnerships and community engagement. “It was never intended to be seen at eye level. That is a powerful action.”

Nearby, text panels resurrect a discourse that has been mostly forgotten or suppressed — contemporary anger from 1903 as people debated the propriety of placing Lee, a traitor, in the Capitol. A Union veterans’ group representative said it would “put a premium on treason” and a congressman from Iowa decried the moral equivalence between those “who fought on the side of the Union and those who fought against it.”

It takes only a generation for a statue, or memorial, or historical myth, to seem like it was always there, a natural part of the physical and ideological landscape. By placing Lee next to voices that destabilize that “always there” — reminding us that it was offensive from the beginning for Lee to represent Virginia — the VMHC shifts the emotional valence of this statue as profoundly as the Valentine reinterprets the Jefferson Davis sculpture.

During the debate over whether to remove Confederate iconography from the public square, defenders of these works, including former president Donald Trump, decried what they said was an erasure or loss of history. What’s happening in Richmond today proves how wrong that

was an erasure of loss of history. What's happening in Richmond today proves how wrong that claim was. When they existed simply as statues, these sculptures did little more than claim that reverence is due to the people they represent. Today, as the VMHC's Rogers says, "it is their absence that is being interpreted."

Asked about the display of the former Confederate icons, Enjoli Moon, one of the leaders of the JXN project says, "The fact that they are down, we are happy about that." But, she said, "It is important to preface this, we don't care about the monuments." Her group is focused on Jackson Ward, known as the Harlem of the South, where in the last century thousands of residents were displaced to dig an enormous trench to contain Interstate 95.

At the time, city leaders and other advocates explicitly endorsed the route through the African American neighborhood because it would protect heritage, meaning Confederate memorials; historic homes including the White House of the Confederacy; and sites associated with Virginia's history as the capital of one of the original 13 states of the union. That meant the 18th-century cabin, built by Abraham Skipwith, would be torn down. Instead, it was saved by preservationists who moved it to a former plantation in Goochland County, once owned by a top Confederate political leader. It remains there, renovated and immaculate, like the pristine 18th-century houses at the Colonial Williamsburg history park, but with little connection to its original owner and his remarkable story.

Moon and her group want to re-create the cabin as a historic site near where it once sat, on a new plot just south of I-95. For Moon, re-creating the cabin would help expand understanding of Richmond's Black community, including enslaved people who lived not on plantations, but in the city.

"We are thinking everyone is on a plantation, picking cotton, but he could read, he was a clerk, and he would not allow himself to be referred to as a slave," she says. Skipwith was alive when the Republic was founded, and his life intersected with at least one signer of the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Harrison V, who backed Skipwith's 1785 legislation petition for emancipation. By the time the United States celebrates its 250th anniversary, in 2026, Moon hopes Skipwith is understood not just as a symbolic founding father of Jackson Ward, but as a founding father of the Republic itself.

"It is important to bring Skipwith into that conversation," she says.

History expanded

Rebuilding the cottage would add another point on the tourist's map of Richmond, expanding the geography of its heritage sites. The bustle of recent historical activity in Richmond highlights the idea of expansion as a riposte to false claims of "erasure" or "replacement" that have dogged debates about icons and race.

Expansion was also key to the remarkable changes at the VMHC. Until 2018, the organization was known as the Virginia Historical Society, founded in 1831, with Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall as its first president. For decades, it operated primarily as an archive and research facility, amassing millions of objects, mostly books and documents. Although it hosted public exhibitions regularly since the 1990s, leaders of the organization were well aware of its reputation as a closed, elite and unwelcoming edifice.

“The name was a hurdle,” says Jamie Bosket, president of the VMHC since 2017. So, they changed the name and embarked on a campaign to become a history museum aimed at the general public. The pandemic shutdown in March 2020 accelerated a major architectural renovation, including the addition of 50 percent more gallery space and installation of new exhibits.

“We saw what was happening around us, at times it was at the front door step of our museum,” he says. The museum sits on what is now Arthur Ashe Boulevard, close to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, near Monument Avenue, on land that was once the site of a Confederate veteran’s home.

The result is a compelling new museum of Virginia’s full history, including its Native American origins, its settlement by the English, the arrival of enslaved Africans, the founding of the Republic, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and on to the events of the past two years.

Among the new exhibitions is “Our Commonwealth,” which covers the state region by region, from the Tidewater and central Virginia to the Shenandoah, the southwest and Northern Virginia, with its large, culturally and racially diverse population.

That exhibition, along with a gallery of landscape art from the state’s five regions, provides a subtle but telling balance to the harder challenges the museum confronts, and meets, with grace. By highlighting forms of diversity that are commonly accepted as enriching — the diversity of food, music, dance, landscape and other folkways — the museum offers stable ground on which to address the ways in which racial and other differences have been exploited to divide the state.

The result is a fully satisfying, engaging and often moving museum, that echoes in its tone what is happening at all levels of public history throughout the city. Nothing has been erased or replaced. Rather, history has been expanded, amended and reordered, with a tone that is neither wholly despondent nor celebratory. It is a mixed bag, warts and all, and much more interesting than a silent statue on a plinth demanding homage it doesn’t deserve.