

The Future of Monument Avenue and other Civil War Monuments

On September 7th, 2017, museum and preservation professionals from across the Commonwealth met in Richmond for an open discussion of the current controversy around Civil War monuments and memorials. We have gathered that discussion here into a brief summary.

TOPIC #1

Does moving the monuments about the Civil War change their historic value? Implications for the statuary, the historic districts, and the locality as a whole?

General Clarifications:

While this discussion took place in Richmond, and Monument Avenue was at the forefront of many attendees' minds, the goal of the discussion was to make it broad enough to encompass issues throughout the state.

As we began this topic, there was discussion about what "historic value" actually meant. A representative from the Virginia Conservation Association clarified that here, it describes the impact of the object, which is more than just a physical monument, but the landscape as well. Therefore moving it would change the overall feeling of the area and, (in the case of Monument Avenue) the National Register ranking as well. It could also affect other areas, such as tourism. Another attendee clarified that historic value was educational, interpretive, and economic. More than history, it is art, reverence, and context.

Summary of basic themes:

- There is a significance to Richmond as the location of the Confederacy leadership.
- Monuments were erected as a result of complex decision-making processes, including anniversaries of the war, and political and economic interests of individuals and communities. Jim Crow era laws as racist motivations and improving real estate values were also motivating factors.
- A distinction exists between a monument and memorial, and should be recognized.
- Personal opinion, when expressed, generally did not embrace removal of historic monuments. Sited for this stance were: lack of information, potential conflicts with National Historic Register designation, and the nature of the space left after removal.

Expanded Summary

History behind the monuments:

Memorials on Monument Avenue not documenting specific sites, [but rather larger concepts].

- Erected late 1800s and early 1900s by affluent whites, associated with real estate values, not the Civil War
- At time of Jim Crow and free black assimilation into white society
- Taxpayer expense for maintenance over the years
- If the monuments weren't figurative, but rather obelisks, there would be less of an issue
- No equivalent slave monument in Richmond
- No proposed/ appropriate destination if removed

Memorials/ Monuments—why were they erected when they were? People are automatically attaching Jim Crowism with the statues. This may be true; the timeline of when there were boosts in statues being erected could support that, BUT the first wave of statues being erected was also the time when there was an economic resurgence in the south, as well as notable commemoration of Confederate soldiers before their generation passed. It should be noted that statue building occurred at the same time in the North, as well.

- Poverty required time lag before monuments were able to be built/ commissioned
- Monuments erected for anniversary commemorations (1961-1965 also correlates with the Civil War centennial)
- Length of time to raise money for a monument impacted when erected

The difference between memorials and monuments: to an individual, a group, vs a concept

- A blanket solution for any kind of monument that refers to the Civil War won't work because they each need to be researched individually as regards how and when each was dedicated. For example, the monument to Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville is different than a memorial to fallen soldiers in a cemetery.
- Memorial – something that happened to a specific site or where someone is buried; Monument – overarching expression of something that's in the public realm—what's appropriate may change over time

Monuments throughout the South represent both commissioned and mass-produced monuments

- Monument Ave monuments were commissioned
- Less value to latter, can be found in many places
- Desire for context, artists names, manufacture before developing an opinion of monuments' value

Moving Forward:

If removed what does the empty space become--how do you commemorate an empty space? Focus on form not just site and community; how do you put into place something that fills a void? What happens when they're gone? Does recognizing a lost statue keep the wound open?

Interpretive text panels needed to discuss the good and the bad of the monuments; most people don't know the deeper context or history behind their creation – just know the subject; we need additional context added to help general public understand.

What is appropriate about what is changed at a historic site-- moving commissioned works of art that were designed with the landscape in mind seems like a difficult proposition; instead it could operate as an outdoor museum; reporters should name the artists and sculptors, recognizing the art historical value of the sculptures (on Monument Ave in particular).

Charlottesville:

Change of context in Charlottesville since Robert E. Lee monument was erected in 1930—instead of tearing it down, could add context, or perhaps a Civil Rights memorial.

- Advocacy: apply funding and resources to building balance
- Perhaps the dramatic change in context around these objects is enough that we should reconsider access to these objects

Personal Commentary:

Self-identified tourism coordinator at a Gloucester site with Confederate memorial and black union soldier memorial.

Feels they are historical record of the Confederacy

Reported experiencing threats upholding county's no-flag policy at the site

Self-identified African American historian

The concept of value and changing associations of monuments

Opposed to removing "historical things"

Personally not offended by statues but understands the offense

Should evaluate for present value

Self-identified individual with Confederate ancestors

Removing monuments changes the context of the others—it can be a "slippery slope"

Prefer more information at and about the monuments

TOPIC #2

How can we take a proactive role in influencing the public and decision makers?

General Clarification:

This question moved our discussion from the historical perspective of the monuments to a more forward-thinking conversation about current conditions and how museum and preservation professionals can play a role. We discovered that while there were many potential solutions raised, there were also questions, frustrations, and personal opinions at play as well.

Summary of Basic Themes

- Current public (media) atmosphere is biased.
 - Education systems have not provided knowledge or understanding of the complexity of [The US Civil War]
- Advocacy for:
 - Fact-based discourse based on research using primary sources.
 - Avoid bias, emotional responses and oversimplification
- The role of museums and museum professionals was addressed including institutional and personal responsibility to address lack of knowledge and understanding

Expanded Summary:

Current Conditions:

Monuments have become symbols of attitudes. Statues are not an issue because of the Civil War but because we have a divided country today; we need to talk about relevant topics for the public.

Public discussion frustrating because issues are taken out of context and oversimplified—what is the role of the museum professional in this?

Opportunity is undermined by divisions and misinformation. Incorrect information is presented as fact.

Dislike ascribing motives to those in the past and even primary sources can sometimes be misleading; hard to remove personal biases while reviewing historic documents, for example; the “why’s” are impossible to answer, so let’s focus on a solution.

Moving Forward:

Research facts using primary sources and avoid bias as much as possible; clarify that preservation is not a political statement.

What Can Museums Do?

- Museums are trusted sources of information, for example the American Civil War Museums' website, www.Onmonumentave.com
- People get information from museums, family, school, and the internet – can we collaborate together and organize to get information out to the press and the people; can VAM organize roots to start that process?
- Train docents on how to approach difficult topics
- Offer facts not opinions; emotions were high in the 1800s, today they're high for another reason, in the future it will be for a different reason; generational changes about how people feel about these
- Speaking with calm voices in a crowd of people with strong opinions
- Race is a major issue; learn how to listen – how do people of color feel about statues? How do we talk about race and privilege? How do we train staff or offer training to the public?
- Listening and facilitating ways for people to actually talk to each other; we should be tools for creating this communication.
- There is a lot of misinformation in the general public, through the school system, there is no room for nuance in social studies education in elementary schools, get tools out to teachers; focus on educators and improve understanding of the complexities of history.
- History is messy. People love to pick the one thing they understand and run it to the ground. The monuments themselves are messy, put up for specific reasons. We need to be able to explain this.

TOPIC #3

Open session

General Clarification:

At the close of our conversation, we opened the floor to more general discussion of items that attendees felt were not already addressed. These items veered away from just the monuments, but I have tried to summarize major thoughts here.

Summary of Basic Themes:

- Public safety is a concern around the monument issue
- Technical problems of removal and storage, or museum display
- Other examples of monuments in Richmond with potential for controversy: AP Hill (a grave) and Columbus
- Actions in Berlin (with Nazi monuments and the Wall) and Ukraine (former Soviet monuments) as models or cautionary tales
- Other race/ culture-related divisions, for example, name change of Columbus Day to Native Peoples Day; Tribal and Native American viewpoint introduced.

Expanded Summary:

Additional Monument-Related Comments:

We need to be concerned with public safety and loss of life-- How do we respond when an argument is made that lives shouldn't be put at stake for statues?

Let's look at Berlin and how they recognize their past. Realize that there still are Neo-Nazis there today who congregate at places like where his bunker was. It's naïve to think that just by taking down monuments that the negative symbology won't remain.

We're battling nostalgia, not history. It's the idea of Monument Avenue that's the issue. Not the statues themselves.

Neo-Nazi attachment to Lee is inconsistent with his stated values.

Do we change the name to from "Civil War" to "Lost Cause Monuments"-- We should expand the context overall.

Question of museums taking on stewardship if monuments are removed; has been in the media

- massive museum space would be required, massive expense

These discussions are community specific. Monument Avenue is very different than Charlottesville.

“Historic Preservation is about the future and communities figuring out what they have and what they want to bring with them into their future.” History is about History but Preservation is about People and Community.

What Can Museums Do?

- Need to educate boards or trustees-- How do we reach them? Need their support – but should or will we be advocates for preservation?
- Create working groups out of this discussion?
- Can be an affirmation of civil dialogue
- How do we advance this? How can we add to the discussion that removal doesn't change history? How can we advance this to be good stewards?
- Education is the key, through our schools, field trips have been cut. We have to bring it to them, students tell their parents and educate them as well. It can work anywhere.