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Confederate Memory

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Abstract
This year as a CWI Fellow, I've been doing a lot of research and thinking on Civil War memory, specifically that of Confederate memory. When doing this work, the question at the back of my mind is always: How should monuments, symbols, and other examples of Confederate memory be handled? This is a very difficult question, so up until now, I've left it alone, knowing that there would come a time in the future that I would sit down and wrestle with my conflicting opinions on the matter. A couple days ago, the Civil War Era Studies Department here at Gettysburg College sent out an email sharing the news that New Orleans had begun removing Confederate monuments and several other cities were thinking of doing the same. After reading this, I knew the time had come for me, and all of you, to join the discussion about Confederate Memory.

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Comments
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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER
ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Confederate Memory

By Olivia Ortman '19

 This year as a CWI Fellow, I've been doing a lot of research and thinking on Civil War memory, specifically that of Confederate memory. When doing this work, the question at the back of my mind is always: How should monuments, symbols, and other examples of Confederate memory be handled? This is a very difficult question, so up until now, I've left it alone, knowing that there would come a time in the future that I would sit down and wrestle with my conflicting opinions on the matter. A couple days ago, the Civil War Era Studies Department here at Gettysburg College sent out an email sharing the news that New Orleans had begun removing Confederate monuments and several other cities were thinking of doing the same. After reading this, I knew the time had come for me, and all of you, to join the discussion about Confederate Memory.

The first question that I ask myself when thinking about how to handle Confederate Memory is what the people want. Confederate monuments have a variety of owners. In some cases, the monuments are owned by a private organization or individual who put them up, in other cases, the city, state, or federal government may own them. The same goes for the land they are on. If owned by individuals or private groups, it's their choice what happens. When the monument or land belongs to the local government, as is the case with the New Orleans monuments, it should be the people's choice what happens. Although the city council of New Orleans voted 6 to 1 to remove several monuments, the residents didn't get the chance to vote. For many issues, allowing the council to take care of matters on their own is fine; the people elected them because they trusted them to make the right decisions. In matters that generate a lot of public concern, though, residents are usually asked to vote. We vote on taxes, why not on monuments? If the majority of city residents agree with the removal of a Confederate symbol or monument, remove it and say no more. If the majority of residents are against the action, however, it doesn't seem right to disrespect their wishes. The popular vote in New Orleans may have agreed with the removal of the monuments, but without that formal vote, we can't know for sure.

Monument Dedicated to the Crescent City White League and the Battle of Liberty Place. Photo via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Another important question to ask is what message the monument or symbol is sending. When the message being sent is one of explicit hate, the monument should be removed. I actually agree with New Orleans and their removal of this first monument. The [monument](#) that New Orleans is currently removing was a monument built in 1891 to commemorate the Crescent City White League. As the name implies, the White League was a group of white men agitating for racial inequality in the Reconstruction Era South. While the monument was presented as a memorial to those who died in the Battle of Liberty Place—a violent confrontation between the White League and city police—it instead acted as an acute reminder of white supremacy and the government's inability to prevent racism. For many years, there was a [plaque at the base](#) of the monument specifically referring to white supremacy. Monuments like this one that promote ideas that we don't tolerate as a country should be removed. Little by little we've been working to rid the country of racism and removing monuments like these should be part of that process.

The other monuments being removed are dedicated to Confederate Leaders Jefferson Davis, P.G.T. Beauregard, and Robert E. Lee (they're also renaming a park named for Lee). None of these monuments are specifically racist. The arguments being made for their removal are that these are men who fought against their nation and fought for slavery. This is tricky, though, because using those two points as cause for removal can lead us down a slippery slope. If we remove every monument dedicated to someone with

ties to slavery or racism, even Lincoln won't be left standing. Our Founding Fathers would have to be the first to go; they created the system of inequality in this country that later led to the Civil War. I'm certainly not in any rush to see Jefferson monuments toppled, so I don't think we should start pulling down these Confederate monuments.

Robert E. Lee Monument in New Orleans. Via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

So now we're back to the question of how to handle Confederate memory. I think my ultimate answer is to use it as an educational opportunity. We need to find ways to use these monuments to create open discussion. We all know that removing these monuments will not remove these Confederate leaders from people's hearts, so it would be pointless to try. If anything, we will create martyrs out of these men. People who were moderates on the issue of handling symbols of Confederate memory will become radicals. Those who are currently open to the ideas of open discussion on the full meaning, good and bad, surrounding these monuments will shut down. They will see this as an attack on history and a white-washing of our gritty past. They will protest and get up in arms, unwilling to listen to others with different views. This is the opposite of what we want.

We may not be able to remove these monuments from public view, but we can work on how people view these men and the Confederacy. The root of the issue with Confederate monuments is not really the monuments themselves. The root is our fear about the monuments feeding into Lost Cause or Neo-Confederacy ideologies. Instead of targeting the monuments, we should be targeting the ideology. This starts by providing knowledge. Many cities have begun erecting [interpretive plaques](#) to go along with monuments, giving a more holistic story of the subject. This is a great approach not only to Confederate Memory, but to history in general. It allows us, as a people, to remove our romantic notions of the past and understand people and events for what they were.

Those who demonize Confederate leaders need to understand that their lives were filled with more than just their roles in the Civil War. Those who iconize these men need to see that they did make mistakes. We can't fully put aside lingering Civil War tensions until we face our past in its entirety, and these monuments can be the beginning of that journey.

What do all of you think? What should we do with these monuments and other symbols of Confederate Memory?

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