

Youngkin Vetoes Measures to Remove Tax Breaks for Confederate Heritage Group

The Virginia governor rejected efforts by the state's Democrats to reshape the Commonwealth's relationship with its Confederate past.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin speaking at a rally in Virginia Beach last year.Credit...Kristen Zeis for The New York Times

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Gov. Glenn Youngkin of Virginia vetoed on Friday two bills that would have revoked tax exemptions for the United Daughters of the Confederacy, a century-old organization that has often been at the center of debates over the state's Confederate past and its racial history.

In doing so, Mr. Youngkin sided with fellow Republicans in the legislature who almost unanimously opposed [the bills and the efforts](#) by the state's Democrats to curtail the Commonwealth's relationship with Confederate heritage organizations. The bills had nearly unanimous Democratic support in both chambers of the legislature. (One Democrat did not participate in one of the votes.)

The organization's property tax exemptions were added to the state code in the 1950s, during segregation and when the Commonwealth maintained a closer relationship with the group. The organization's Virginia division is also exempt from paying recordation taxes, which are levied when property sales are registered for public record.

In a statement explaining his decision, Mr. Youngkin acknowledged that the property tax exemption was “ripe for reform, delineated by inconsistencies and discrepancies.” But, he said that the bills were too narrow, specifically targeting the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and approving them would set “an inappropriate precedent.”

Lawmakers who introduced the bills said that they had wanted to modernize the tax code to reflect the state's current values; they also stated that the government should not support organizations that promote myths romanticizing the Confederacy. Critics of the legislation said that the bills unfairly targeted the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and claimed that the group and its purposes were misunderstood.

Alex Askew, a Democratic delegate who introduced one of the bills, called the governor's vetoes "perplexing."

"The people of Virginia deserve to know why the governor is providing tax relief to historically pro-slavery institutions," Mr. Askew said in a statement, adding, "Let's work towards a fairer, more inclusive tax policy that truly reflects our commitment to equality and progress."

If Mr. Youngkin had signed the bills, two other entities, the Stonewall Jackson Memorial Inc. and the Confederate Memorial Literary Society, would also have faced threats to their property tax exemptions.

"The governor has consistently worked in a direction that would endear him to the Republican base," Stephen Farnsworth, a professor of political science at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, said in April, after the assembly passed the bills. He added that because of political and cultural shifts in Virginia in recent years, he expected the tax exemptions to be revoked the next time a Democrat becomes governor.

The legacy of the Confederacy is still being contested in the state that once contained its capital. In Charlottesville and Richmond, statues and monuments to Confederate figures have come down over the past decade, but earlier this month, a rural school district [restored the names](#) of Confederate officers to two schools, four years after [voting to remove them](#).

The legislature also narrowly passed a bill to repeal special license plates featuring Robert E. Lee and the Sons of Confederate Veterans, a men's heritage organization. Governor Youngkin also vetoed that bill on Friday.

With his veto on the tax exemption bills, Mr. Youngkin prevented the United Daughters of the Confederacy's headquarters, a marble-clad building in Richmond, from becoming subject to property taxation. The building, which doubles as a memorial to wartime women of the Confederacy, opened in 1957 and has been listed for exemption in the tax code ever since.

The organization, which is identified as the owner of the property, would have become responsible for paying the taxes if a law had revoked the exemptions, according to Parrish Simmons, a representative with Richmond's real estate assessor. The taxes could have totaled over \$53,000 annually.

The United Daughters of the Confederacy did not immediately return a request for comment, but in a statement issued before the governor's veto, Jinny Widowski, the president of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, said the legislative efforts to revoke the tax exemptions were unfair and discriminatory, adding, "The continued harassment of our ladies and our mission will not deter us from the charitable work that we do."

Since its founding in 1894, the group has been open to membership for women who are descendants of Confederate soldiers. Though the stated purpose of the United Daughters of the Confederacy is to honor ancestors through memorial preservation and charity work, the organization is most often associated [with Confederate statues](#), which it raised funds to build throughout the 20th century, and which it still defends.

Legislative efforts to revoke the tax exemptions began in 2023, when Don Scott, a Democratic delegate, introduced a bill that failed in the House, which at the time had a narrow Republican majority.

In January, after control of the House flipped and Mr. Scott became Virginia's first Black Speaker, Mr. Askew reintroduced the bill. In February, he said in an interview that the purpose of the bill was not to interfere with the United Daughters of the Confederacy's charity work, but to make sure the state code better reflected the Commonwealth's modern values.