

Background info on Confederate monuments

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After the Civil War and Reconstruction, and all through the Jim Crow era, Virginia's government and civic institutions joined Confederate veterans and their descendants to rob nonwhite citizens of their rights, obscure the Confederacy's origins as a society built on slavery, and spread a lie of Southern gallantry that modern historians have [emphatically debunked](#).

The monuments [served both those purposes](#). They elevated as heroes **men who abandoned their country and killed their fellow citizens because they wanted to buy and sell other people's children**. And they reminded nonwhite Virginians that the people who held power over their lives – and barred them from the ballot box – considered those men noble and admirable.

The truth the Lost Cause sought to conceal

In 1861, Alexander Stephens, vice-president of the Confederacy, declared in a [speech](#) describing its newly written constitution that **Jefferson and the other Founding Fathers were wrong to believe that slavery was evil, and wrong to believe in human equality**, and that anyone who disagreed with him that **black people were inferior** was an **insane fanatic**:

*“The new constitution has put at rest, forever, all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution—**African slavery as it exists amongst us—the proper status of the negro in our form of civilization**. ... The prevailing ideas entertained by [Thomas Jefferson] and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old constitution, were that **the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically**. ... Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon **the assumption of the equality of races**. This was an error.*

*Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests upon the great truth that **the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition**.*

*This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, **based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth**. ... Many who hear me, perhaps, can recollect well, that this truth was not generally admitted, even within their day. The errors of the past generation still clung to many as late as twenty years ago. Those at the North, who still cling to these errors, with a zeal above knowledge, **we justly denominate fanatics**.*

*All fanaticism springs from an **aberration of the mind—from a defect in reasoning. It is a species of insanity.** One of the most striking characteristics of insanity, in many instances, is forming correct conclusions from fancied or erroneous premises; so with the anti-slavery fanatics; their conclusions are right if their premises were. **They assume that the negro is equal, and hence conclude that he is entitled to equal privileges and rights with the white man.** If their premises were correct, their conclusions would be logical and just—but **their premise being wrong, their whole argument fails.***

Virginia's brief [declaration of secession](#), while less explicit, called out "the oppression of the Southern slaveholding states." At the 1861 convention where Virginia decided to secede, Henry Benning, an emissary from Georgia who would become a Confederate general and the namesake of Georgia's Fort Benning (now Fort Moore) U.S. Army base, talked about how the South had to secede because [otherwise the North would abolish slavery](#), triggering an apocalyptic race war in which black people would exterminate whites.

The Confederacy put [images of enslaved people](#) on one of its \$100 bills, which was printed in Richmond. And the Confederate Constitution explicitly wrote in [protections for slaveowners](#), including a blanket ban on ever passing any law that would "[impair] the right of property in negro slaves." (Note that this explicitly cuts against the idea that the Confederacy stood for "state's rights," since it's effectively barring any of its states from taking an action that works against the institution of slavery.)

We tend to think that Abraham Lincoln touched off the Civil War by intending to [end slavery and free the slaves](#) -- especially given his later signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Edward L. Baptist's 2016 history [The Half Has Never Been Told](#) notes that Lincoln ascended to the Presidency explicitly promising to *preserve* slavery in the states that already had it; he merely intended to [prevent its further expansion](#), believing that if slavery could not spread to new territories, it would slowly die out. Lincoln believed slavery was wrong, and he figured this was the most cautious, least destructive way to sever it from American society.

Again, Lincoln wasn't going to do *a single thing* to the slaveholding states. He wasn't going to interfere in how they ran themselves. He wasn't going to free their enslaved captives. But the mere idea that slavery wouldn't be able to keep spreading through the rest of the country -- that slave states would no longer effectively have national and legislative veto power over states that didn't *want* to enslave their fellow human beings -- so offended the members of the future Confederacy that they [rushed to secede](#).

But the year after the Civil War ended, in 1866, Edward A. Pollard *literally started rewriting history* with the publication of his book, [The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates](#), which argued, among other things, that Lincoln's election was unfair and essentially illegal, that Southern states were merely acting to justly preserve their rights, and

that what some people called slavery was actually a civilizing education black people sorely needed, and without which they would descend into chaos.

No apologies, no retreat

Pollard's Lost Cause lie and others like it became gospel for decades nationwide, finding their way into the popular imagination through films like 1915's *Birth of a Nation* and 1939's *Gone With the Wind*, as well as the textbooks with which Virginia taught its students. Confederate sympathizers didn't hide their intent to spread an edited version of history that suited their agenda.

As part of the festivities surrounding [Charlottesville's 1924 dedication of its Robert E. Lee statue](#), Major General W.R. Freeman of the United Confederate Veterans [announced to the assembled veterans](#) that the American Legion intended to distribute Confederate-approved history textbooks nationwide: "I need not speak here of **the need of a true history of our people of the southland**. You know what we have had, and how long we have combated the errors put before our children in the form of history." The new narrative would include "the dark reconstruction days following the war," and "In all of this, we find nothing whatever that is objectionable."

(As historian [Brendan Wolfe](#) notes, the "errors put before our children" to which Freeman and others objected included the Rev. Dr. Henry W. Elson's five-volume history of the United States, which [angered Virginians](#) upon its publication in 1904 by [accurately](#) noting, among other things, that Southern enslavers often [raped the women they had enslaved](#). Note that a cursory reading suggests Elson's history is *itself* jaw-droppingly racist toward black people.)

The resulting textbook that the UCV found unobjectionable proved **so riddled with glaring errors** that even the American Legion, which openly promoted racist beliefs at the time, [disowned it](#).

This was neither the only nor the most successful attempt to whitewash the Confederacy through Virginia's school textbooks. In 1948, in the wake of President Harry Truman's integration of the armed forces, Virginia state lawmakers specifically [commissioned historical textbooks at multiple grade levels](#), written in part by fervent advocates of the Lost Cause, that fully bought into Confederate mythmaking. They acknowledged some "problems" with slavery, but also painted slavery as a pleasant, fair, and edifying institution that enslaved people cherished. Despite increasing awareness of the warped picture these books painted, Virginia schoolkids continued getting indoctrinated with these lies well into the 1970s.

Far from reflecting on the horrors the Confederacy wrought, its advocates doubled down in covering them up. Later in the 1924 Charlottesville festivities, Don P. Halsey of Lynchburg would declare:

"We have nothing to be ashamed of, and nothing to apologize for ... If the South is ever to take the full and equal part in the restored Union to which it is by right entitled, it is not upon any maudlin "New South," but upon the broad and solid foundations of the Old South that we are to build — the Old South with its old courage, its old courtesy, its old reverence for women, its old fortitude in trial, its old spirit of pride in its history, its old devotion to principle and its old traditions of truth and honor and loyalty and right!"

Remember, the Confederacy's founding speech declared slavery and white supremacy its "cornerstone." But by the time white Southerners were imposing Jim Crow, they did their best to pretend that never happened.

In all the remarks from Charlottesville's Lee statue dedication and the meetings that followed, the word "slavery" only seems (the text is garbled from being scanned into a computer, so I can't be certain) to appear twice: Once in passing, in Freeman's mention of the textbooks, and once in remarks from the Rev. Dr. M. Ashby Jones. Jones personally advocated for equal rights elsewhere in his life, yet here, even he knowingly or unknowingly repeated the lie that Robert E. Lee "abhorred slavery." ([Lee really, really didn't.](#) But [plenty of people still think he did.](#))

Sometimes the people dedicating these monuments didn't even try to hide their true reasons for erecting them. On June 2, 1913, at the dedication of the University of North Carolina's ["Silent Sam"](#) Confederate memorial in Chapel Hill, [speaker Julian Carr](#) paused in his fulsome praise of Confederate valor and Confederate women to deliver this telling anecdote:

"The present generation, I am persuaded, scarcely takes note of what the Confederate soldier meant to the welfare of the Anglo Saxon race during the four years immediately succeeding the war, when the facts are, that their courage and steadfastness saved the very life of the Anglo Saxon race in the South — When "the bottom rail was on top" all over the Southern states, and to-day, as a consequence **the purest strain of the Anglo Saxon is to be found in the 13 Southern States** — Praise God.

"I trust I may be pardoned for one allusion, howbeit it is rather personal. One hundred yards from where we stand, less than ninety days perhaps after my return from Appomattox, I horse-whipped a negro wench until her skirts hung in shreds, because upon the streets of this quiet village she had publicly insulted and maligned a Southern lady, and then rushed for protection to these University buildings where was stationed a garrison of 100 Federal soldiers. I performed the pleasing duty in the immediate presence of the entire garrison, and for thirty nights afterwards slept with a double-barrel shot gun under my head."

Yes, you read that right: That's a guy pausing, in his dedication of the Confederate memorial for which he was the largest single donor, to drop some casual eugenics and fondly recall the time he beat a woman bloody, enjoyed it, and faced no consequences for it, because she said a mean thing to someone else. His speech has zero mentions of the words "slave" or "slavery."

Julian Carr was a [noted Klan supporter](#), business tycoon, generous philanthropist, son of an enslaver, enthusiastic lynching advocate, and Confederate Army veteran. Ten years after his charming little speech, in 1923, UNC gave him an honorary degree.

The people who put up these monuments knew exactly what message they were sending, and which inconvenient parts of history they wanted to paper over. We know this because they came right out and told us so.

The context for our monuments and the laws protecting them

So what kind of laws was Virginia passing around the time the law protecting war monuments went into effect, and as many of Virginia's Confederate monuments were being put up?

In [1904](#), Virginia passed the first version of its law, effectively repealed in 2020, that prohibited counties from taking down any Civil War monuments. This law came at the beginning of a wave of other legislation designed to disenfranchise, disempower, and discriminate against nonwhite Virginians.

Virginia had passed its [first Jim Crow law](#), segregating train cars, in 1900. In 1902, Virginia adopted a [new constitution](#) imposing poll taxes, poll tests, and other measures designed to keep black (and working-class white) people from voting. (The commonwealth retained that Constitution until 1971.) According to the Virginia Museum of History & Culture, "within 90 days more than 125,000 of the 147,000 black voters in the state had been [stricken from the rolls](#)."

In 1912, Virginia passed a law segregating residential neighborhoods; the Supreme Court declared similar laws unconstitutional in 1917, 1928, and 1930, but it stayed on the books in Virginia until 1950.

In 1922, the [Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America](#) was founded in Richmond. This white supremacist organization, "aimed primarily at the 'Negro problem'" according to a [1967 history of Jim Crow laws in Virginia](#), "also advocated more intelligent selection of immigrants allowed into the United States so as to strengthen 'Anglo-Saxon instincts, traditions, and principles' in America."

The Anglo-Saxon Clubs had 400 members by 1923, 32 "posts" by 1925, and their lobbying efforts are credited with Virginia's passage of the [Racial Integrity Act in 1924](#), requiring classifications of "white" or "colored" on all birth certificates, and forbidding interracial marriage. By 1926, Virginia enforced racial segregation in nearly all public spaces and institutions.

A chart compiling nationwide [monuments and when they were built](#) from the Southern Poverty Law Center shows a huge spike in the building of monuments, especially those outside of courthouses, between 1900 and 1920, as whites reasserted control over the South and imposed

Jim Crow laws. There's another, smaller spike in the 1950s and 1960s, when absolutely nothing was happening that might have spurred a sudden interest in celebrating the Confederacy.

As of 2019, there were [53 Confederate memorials outside courthouses](#) in Virginia (out of [54 courthouses](#)), part of at least [223 public Confederate memorials](#) of any kind throughout the state – the most of any state in the US. Only three courthouse memorials were built before 1900; most were built between 1900 and 1920.

What message does it send, in a state taking legal rights away from nonwhite citizens, to place a monument to the Confederacy outside a courthouse? What would a black or brown Virginian walking into that courthouse to try to argue for their Constitutional rights think, seeing that statue? And what message does it send when one of those monuments goes up outside nearly every courthouse in the state?

Who gets remembered, and who doesn't?

Between monuments, memorials, schools, and street names, Robert E. Lee was honored more than 50 times in Virginia as of 2019, as best as I can count. Stonewall Jackson gets around 25 various remembrances, including one marking the grave of his [severed arm](#). Yet curiously, two notable and relatively prominent heroes of the Confederacy got largely left out of Virginia's memorial-building trend – because the trajectory of their lives clashed with the Lost Cause, no-apologies narrative postwar Confederate sympathizers wished to uphold.

Lt. Gen. [James Longstreet](#), a close friend of Lee's, fought bravely at Gettysburg and until the end of the war. But after the war, he supported Reconstruction and risked his life – he got shot! – to lead a mostly black Louisiana state militia against white supremacist terrorists attempting to violently overthrow the state government. This [did not endear him](#) to his fellow Confederates. (Nor, in fairness, did his postwar criticism of Lee and his tactics.) Longstreet has zero statues, though he does get [three streets](#) named after him.

But fine, Longstreet wasn't from Virginia. [William Mahone](#) was. This courageous general, later a railway tycoon and U.S. senator from Virginia, gets a highway, a street, and – not a statue, but a [single featureless obelisk](#) with his name and a plaque on it at [Petersburg National Battlefield](#). They kind of had to remember him there; his forces got blown up by Union explosives that had been tunneled underneath their fortifications, yet he still rallied his troops to defeat the Union soldiers who charged at them in the wake of the blast. (The monument doesn't mention how his "gallant" forces [massacred black Union troops](#) who'd surrendered after that defeat.)

So why doesn't this prominent figure of Virginia's pre- and postwar history rate more of the adulation and heroic idolization heaped upon Lee and Jackson? His leadership of a short-lived but, for its time, highly effective biracial political coalition, the [Readjuster Party](#), may have had something to do with it.

Mahone, who had enslaved people before the war, apparently wasn't passionate about racial equality except as a means to his own ambitious ends. But he and his party did effectively expand rights and opportunities for black (and poor white) Virginians during Reconstruction, earning him the [enmity](#) of the same Confederate veterans who turned on Longstreet.

And finally, a word from someone who ought to know:

[Lexington Va: 5 Aug 1869](#)

Dear Sir:

Absence from Lexington has prevented my receiving until today your letter of the 26th Ult: enclosing an invitation from the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association, to attend a meeting of the officers engaged in that battle at Gettysburg, for the purpose of marking upon the ground by enduring memorials of granite the position & movements of the Armies on the field.

*My engagements will not permit me to be present, & I believe if there I could not add anything material to the information existing on the subject. **I think it wiser moreover not to keep open the sores of war, but to follow the examples of those nations who endeavored to obliterate the marks of civil strife & to commit to oblivion the feelings it engendered.***

Very respy your obt Sevt
R E Lee