

# Confederate Monuments: Heritage, Racism, Anachronism, and Who Gets to Decide?

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The monuments in our towns and cities are like time capsules. They preserve in bronze and stone a set of ideas and values that one generation wishes to pass on to the future. Over time, the messages that previous generations wished to send can become part of the heritage of a particular place, becoming iconic symbols that represent local pride. Monuments can also become anachronistic, particularly when the values they represent are no longer shared by the people who live around them.

The American South is dotted with monuments to Confederate soldiers and statesmen. Many monuments were erected after Reconstruction when whites had regained political power and were systematically disenfranchising African Americans. The monuments were designed to instruct younger generations born after the Civil War about a narrative historians call the “Lost Cause.” This narrative, debunked by scholars, cast the Civil War as a noble, but unwinnable battle between Southern gentlemen who fought for liberty and self-determination against Yankee aggression bent on turning the South into a colony for Northern merchants and bankers. This collective memory removes the stain of guilt from Southern whites for the enslavement of millions of African Americans or for starting the bloodiest war in American history.

This article explores how middle and high school teachers can use historical and contemporary debates to explore (1) how public art tells a story; (2) how that story changes over time; and (3) how students can play a civic role by engaging current debates. Using three specific instances of controversy related

to Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia—in 1890, in 1996, and today—this article suggests an inquiry into the future of Confederate monuments.

Controversial public art can be used to engage students in inquiry projects that draw on historical, geographic and civic skills. Exploring debates about monuments in historical context can help students understand continuity and change over time. For example, the present meanings applied to such artworks are different than the meaning they held for those who constructed them, and for those who opposed their construction, in the past. Exploring how monuments are used to represent the identity of cities and towns, engages students in spatial thinking related to geography. The addition of new monuments, such as the Arthur Ashe Monument in Richmond, changes the story that is inscribed in the landscape. Taking and defending positions on how such art should be treated in the present, engages students in learning the skills of civic deliberation and action. Currently, citizens are debating what should be done with monuments and symbols that represent the Confederacy.

## Resources

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Robert E. Lee Monument on Richmond's Monument Avenue, unveiled in 1890.

### Controversy 1 – Robert E. Lee: Reconciliation or Exclusion?

Robert E. Lee was a U.S. Army officer who became a general in the Army of Northern Virginia after that state seceded from the United States in 1861. Lee has been revered as an icon of Southern aristocracy. When the Lee Monument was unveiled in 1890, the majority of white Richmonders viewed it as a great addition to their city. The generation that fought for the Confederacy was still alive, and many prominent civic leaders were veterans. The year 1890 was also a time when hope for racial, political, and economic equality was fading fast. Through intimidation, violence and vote rigging, African

Americans were removed from political positions in Richmond soon after federal troops left in 1870. The process of political marginalization continued into the early twentieth century. The unveiling of the Lee statue came right in the middle of this period. Today, it is associated with the rise of white supremacy. At the time, supporters sought to portray Lee as a national hero who helped bring about reconciliation of whites in the North and South. However, African Americans perceived the statue as a symbol of their exclusion from the public and political sphere. The document excerpts included in this article represent these positions on the Lee Monument.

### Controversy 2 – Arthur Ashe: Changing the Story

In 1995, 30 years after passage of the Voting Rights Act, a proposal was made to erect a statue to honor the best known African American from Richmond, tennis champion, author, and civil rights activist Arthur Ashe. Douglas Wilder, the first African American governor of Virginia, who was in office at the time, proposed that Ashe's statue be placed on Monument Avenue. Many Richmond citizens, both white and black, opposed the location. White heritage groups wanted to preserve the pro-Confederate story told by the statues on Monument Avenue. Some African Americans wanted to change that story to be more inclusive of Virginians of African descent. Other African Americans didn't want Ashe associated with Monument Avenue and proposed that the statue be placed in a location that didn't represent the exclusion of African Americans. The document excerpts on p. 359 represent three positions in regards to this plan.

### Controversy 3 – Confederate Monuments: Heritage, Racism, Anachronism, or Historical Accuracy?

Twenty years after the Ashe Monument, in the wake of the 2015 massacre in a South Carolina black church by a white supremacist and the more recent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, Americans nationwide are debating the fate of Confederate symbols. Some argue that monuments should be removed because they are symbols of racism and hate. Others argue that more monuments to famous Virginians, including African Americans and women, should be erected to further adjust the story Monument Avenue tells. Another group advocates that the monuments be contextualized historically by adding placards explaining that they represent the Lost Cause and post-Reconstruction white supremacy. And some believe nothing should be done. The document excerpts on page 360 reflect some of these positions.

# Document Section

## Excerpts from Comments on the Unveiling of the Lee Monument

### Editorial, *The New York Times*, May 30, 1890

“It is rather a pity that there were no organized bodies of representatives of the North at the unveiling of the monument to General Lee. The presence of Southern troops at the funeral of General Grant was recognized as a tribute as honorable to the men who paid it as to the memory of the hero to whom it was paid. A quarter of a century after the close of the war ought to suffice to put all its figures in an historical perspective.... While [Lee] was no doubt doing what he believed to be his duty in ‘going with his State,’ [against the United States] there is no question at all that his conduct throughout the war, and after it, was that of a brave and honorable man. His memory is, therefore, a possession of the American people, and the monument that recalls it is itself a National possession.”

In Brown, Thomas J. *The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration: A Brief History with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

### End of Archer Anderson speech at the Unveiling of the Lee Monument, May 19th, 1890 (Anderson was a former Confederate Army officer) <https://archive.org/details/robertedwardleeaoande>

“[Lee] recognized that the unity of the American people had been irrevocably established. He felt that it would be impiety and crime to dishonor by the petty strife of faction [partisanship] that pure and unselfish struggle for constitutional rights, which, while a single hope remained, had been loyally fought out by great armies, led by heroic captains, and sustained by the patriotic sacrifices of a noble and resolute people. He, therefore, promptly counselled his old soldiers to look upon the great country thus reunited by blood and iron as their own, and to live and labor for its honor and welfare. His own conduct was in accord with these teachings. ...

“Let this monument, then, teach to generations yet unborn these lessons of his life! Let it stand, not as a record of civil strife, but as a perpetual protest against whatever is low and sordid in our public and private objects!”

In Brown, Thomas J. *The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration: A Brief History with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

### Editorial, *Richmond Planet*, an African American newspaper, June 7, 1890

“The Negro was in the Northern processions on Decoration Day and in the Southern ones, if only to carry buckets of ice-water. He put up the Lee Monument, and should the time come, will be there to take it down ... who could do without the Negro? You may say what you will, the Negro is here to stay. Nothing goes on without him. He was in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the War of the Rebellion, and will be in every one that will take place in this country....

“An old colored man after seeing the mammoth parade of the ex-Confederates on May 19th and gazing at the rebel [Confederate] flags, exclaimed “The Southern white folks is on top—the Southern white folks is on top!” After thinking a moment, a smile lit up his countenance as he chuckled with evident satisfaction, “But we’s got the [Federal] government! We’s got the government!”

In Brown, Thomas J. *The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration: A Brief History with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

Located at the corner of Roseneath Road and Monument Avenue, this statue was erected in 1996 to honor tennis champion, author, civil rights activist Arthur Ashe, a Richmond native.

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### Excerpts Related to the Ashe Monument

**Michael Paul Williams, “Ashe Monument Could be Symbol of Reconciliation,”** *Richmond Times Dispatch*, June 26, 1995

“Richmond could not craft a stronger symbol of racial reconciliation than placing a black man of Ashe’s heroic stature among the Confederate monuments. Ashe ... will lend color and a sense of balance to a street that has come to symbolize Richmond’s bitter legacy of racial tension.”

Virginia Commonwealth University’s Newspaper Microfiche collection, [www.library.vcu.edu](http://www.library.vcu.edu). Available for purchase at [www.richmond.com/archive/](http://www.richmond.com/archive/).

**Editorial, “Richmond’s Vision,”** *Richmond Free Press*, an African American newspaper, July 6-8, 1995

“Placing an image of Arthur Ashe in the same row now occupied by pro-slavery generals would serve not only to demean his outstanding work for human justice and freedom, but also serve to confuse and mislead viewers about heroes and villains...”

“Arthur Ashe was a genuine hero who epitomized the highest values and vision for Richmond. The Rebel generals epitomized Richmond in the pits, at its worst.”

Virginia Commonwealth University’s Newspaper Microfiche collection, [www.library.vcu.edu](http://www.library.vcu.edu)

**Ed Moore, “Confederates and Ashe Not in Best Company,”** *Daily Press*, June 21, 1995

“The politicians want to put Ashe’s statue along a promenade with Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Matthew Maury and J.E.B. Stuart. What’s wrong with this picture? Everything.

“They have besmirched Arthur Ashe. They have equally besmirched the Civil War generals, who in their defense of Virginia probably never considered the advancement of professional tennis to be part of the equation.

“They belittle history and a war that brought 600,000 deaths. They disparage sports, which in all the beauty and pageantry serves as symbol of people attempting to do their physical and mental best, the exact opposite of war and its horrors.”

[articles.dailypress.com/1995-06-21/sports/9506210074\\_1\\_ashe-s-statue-arthur-ashe-civil-war](http://articles.dailypress.com/1995-06-21/sports/9506210074_1_ashe-s-statue-arthur-ashe-civil-war)

## USING THE INDIAN REMOVAL ACT TO TEACH CRITICAL THINKING

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15. Treaty with the Choctaw. Kappler. <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/treaties/cho0310.htm>.
16. Treaty with the Seneca. Kappler. <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/treaties/sen0325.htm#mn>.
17. Treaty with the Seneca and Shawnee. Kappler. <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/treaties/sen0327.htm>.
18. Treaty with the Shawnee. Kappler. <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/treaties/sha0331.htm>.
19. Treaty with the Ottawa. Kappler. <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/treaties/ott0335.htm#mn2>.
20. Treaty with the Wyandotte. Kappler. <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/treaties/wya0339.htm#mn5>.
21. Treaty with the Muskogee (Creeks). Kappler. <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/treaties/cre0341.htm#mn1>.
22. Treaty with the Seminole. Kappler. <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/treaties/sem0344.htm#mn8>.
23. Treaty with the Cherokee. Kappler. <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/treaties/che0439.htm>.

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## Current Controversy

### Editorial, “Airbrushing Confederate History is Not the Answer,” *The Washington Post*, September 14, 2015

“There’s value in historical introspection. History is complex; the more that Americans delve into that complexity, the better. No doubt, it’s hard knowing precisely where to draw the line between irredeemably offensive historical symbols (such as the Confederate flag) and those whose legacy is politely termed ‘mixed.’

“Yet it’s a dangerous business to airbrush the past [by removing the Confederate Monuments], a practice more characteristic of totalitarian societies than free ones. President Franklin D. Roosevelt led the nation through the trials of World War II; he also forced tens of thousands of American citizens into internment camps because of their Japanese heritage. Should his name be erased from public places and institutions? No.

“It’s wiser to learn from history and provide its context than to banish it. In Frederick, in 2008, city officials placed a bronze plaque steps from Taney’s bust, acknowledging that the chief justice, who also served as attorney general and treasury secretary, had ‘revealed the content of established racism’ by his *Dred Scott* opinion.

“That seems to us to be moving in the right direction. Leave the bust; provide some context; teach the history.”\*

\*Note: In March 2017, the bust of former U.S. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney was relocated to Mount Olivet Cemetery in Frederick.

### Michael Paul Williams, “It’s Time for Confederate Monuments to Come Down,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, June 25, 2015

“... what happened in Charleston should make clear that these symbols [of the Confederacy] are unworthy of protection and state support outside of a museum.

“Every day, in Richmond, those [Confederate] monuments demand that we [African Americans] turn the other cheek, or even confer tribute to the men on those pedestals through tax dollars. Would Richmond tolerate taxpayer-supported monuments to black supremacy? It asks a lot of our African-American citizenry to accept these statues as immutable.

“I had hoped that the inclusion of true freedom fighters on that boulevard would lend balance and context to Monument Avenue. That hasn’t happened beyond the relatively small Arthur Ashe statue, and given the size and scale of the Confederate monuments, it seems unlikely that it ever will.”

### The Virginia Flaggers, “Confederate Air Force Takes Flight in the Capital of the Confederacy”

<http://vaflaggers.blogspot.com>, September 21, 2015

“This group [calling for the removal of Confederate monuments], like so many others around the country is attempting to exploit an unrelated tragedy in South Carolina as an excuse to cast aspersion on our Confederate Veterans and force their lopsided, uneducated, politically correct view of history on all of Richmond’s citizens. Recent polls have shown that the majority of the citizens of the Commonwealth, including the Governor, do not want to see any of our Veterans’ monuments or memorials disturbed or removed....

“As the proud descendants of the Confederate soldiers who bravely fought to defend the Commonwealth, we will not sit by quietly and allow the attempted destruction of our history to continue. The Virginia Flaggers have coordinated patrols of the city’s monuments each night since June 26, when one of our folks surprised a vandal in the act of defacing the Jefferson Davis Monument. Thanks to information they were able to provide, and evidence left at the scene, the perpetrator was subsequently arrested and convicted.”

<b>Compelling Question</b>	What criteria should be considered when deciding the future of controversial public monuments?	
<b>Standards and Practices</b>	<p><b>Common Core:</b> CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.2, RH.6-8.4, RH.6-8.6, RH.6-8.7; RH.6-8.8; RH.11-12.1; RH.11-12.2; RH.11-12.4; RH.11-12.6; RH.11-12.7; RH.11-12.8</p> <p>Virginia Standards of Learning</p> <p>Middle School: USII 1a, b, c, d, e, g, i, j; 3b; 4c; 9a</p> <p>High School: VUS 1a, b, c, d, f, g, h, i, j; 7e; 8d; 13c</p>	
<b>Staging the Question</b>	This inquiry offers an entry point for exploring the end of Reconstruction and its enduring effects. The teacher could begin by having students respond to one of the following statements: (1) "The South lost the Civil War but won the peace"; (2) "History is written by the victors"; or (3) novelist William Faulkner's quote "The past isn't dead, it isn't even past."	
<b>Supporting Question 1</b>	<b>Supporting Question 2</b>	<b>Supporting Question 3</b>
What story do Confederate monuments tell about the Civil War? Why would some people want to tell <b>that</b> story?	Why have Confederate monuments been controversial at different times? How have those controversies changed over time?	What do today's community activists and thought leaders believe should be done with Confederate monuments?
<b>Formative Performance Task</b>	<b>Formative Performance Task</b>	<b>Formative Performance Task</b>
Analyze images of the monuments. Analysis should begin with a physical description of the monuments and end with inferences about the meaning that the artist wished to convey about the subject, and the implications of that meaning for how the Civil War is remembered.	Students analyze the historical documents, summarize the arguments, and synthesize a description of the controversies that raged at two points in time. A goal of this exercise is to get students to recognize elements of continuity and change in these controversies over time. It will be useful to have students compare their own interpretations of the meaning of the monuments with those of the authors of the documents.	Students will familiarize themselves with current debates about Confederate monuments. The document excerpts provided indicate 3 alternatives. Students should be able to summarize these arguments and to provide reasons why someone might support or reject each.
<b>Featured Sources</b>	<b>Featured Sources</b>	<b>Featured Sources</b>
Images of Lee Monument and Arthur Ashe Monument	Lee Controversy Documents (Excerpts), Ashe Controversy Documents (Excerpts)	Current Controversy Document Excerpts
<b>Summative Performance Task</b>	Students should discover who has jurisdiction over the monuments, and the names of groups that support the various positions on them. Students should choose a group or institution that they want to study. They will write arguments in the form of letters in which they respond to the Compelling Question.	
<b>Taking Informed Action</b>	Students can elect to send their letters, or teachers can have the students choose the letters that they feel best articulate their position(s) on Confederate monuments and mail those letters to the institution, political figure, or advocacy group that they believe will be most effective.	

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