

# Confederate Monuments and their Significance

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In recent years some of North Carolina's monuments, especially Confederate memorials, have been the focus of unprecedented debate. At issue is the continuing symbolic significance of the monuments. Are they benign historic artifacts? Or are they symbols that perpetuate values and traditions that are incompatible with our contemporary beliefs?

We move through a landscape that is cluttered with hundreds and hundreds of historical memorials, often without being aware of how the memorials came into being. Every monument has a history: someone decided to memorialize an event or a figure; someone raised money for the memorial, designed it, and identified a location for it; someone dedicated the monument; and someone has maintained it. Each stage in the life of a monument tells us something about the community where the monument stands. By tracing the history of a single monument or of many monuments, we can learn what North Carolinians have chosen to remember and celebrate at different moments in time. We can also explore what parts of our history they have chosen to ignore, suppress, or forget.

The Confederate monuments in North Carolina and elsewhere did not organically pop up like mushrooms. The installation of more than 200 Confederate memorials across the state was the result of the orchestrated efforts of white southerners with clear objectives. We may be tempted to assume that the monuments honor the men who died fighting during the Civil War. Some monuments to the Confederate dead were indeed erected, especially in the first three decades after the Civil War. These memorials were often located in graveyards and were adorned with conventional Christian symbols associated with death and mourning. But the overwhelming majority of Confederate monuments in North Carolina and elsewhere are not memorials to war dead located in cemeteries. Instead, they are monuments that glorify the Confederacy at least as much as the men who fought to create the slaveholder's republic.

The familiar Confederate monument - with a battle-ready soldier standing atop a tall pedestal - did not become commonplace until the turn of the twentieth century. Then, in a frenzy of monument building, white organizations like the United Daughters of the Confederacy, funded, erected, and dedicated such monuments in many of the most conspicuous public spaces of the state. Instead of memorials in graveyards, Confederate memorialists intentionally located monuments in front of the most important civic buildings, especially courthouses, and along the most important thoroughfares in their communities.

The location and timing of the Confederate monument boom from 1890 to 1920 was directly tied to the political objectives of the sponsors of the monuments. Instead of monuments that expressed contrition for waging the bloodiest war in American history, Confederate memorialists

erected monuments of defiance. It was not coincidental that the monuments were erected at the same time that white North Carolinians were working to deprive African Americans of the rights that they had secured following the defeat of the Confederacy. Monument sponsors looked to the monuments to reassure white southerners that the “Old South” had been the most perfect civilization yet attained, that slavery had been benign, that the Confederacy had been a valiant and noble experiment, and that the region’s white elites were the best guardians of white supremacy. Sponsors made these aims clear in their fundraising appeals, in their dedication speeches, and in the inscriptions on the pedestals of many monuments. The monuments, sponsors hoped, would teach these lessons in perpetuity.

Confederate monuments, then, were the result of private white groups colonizing public space. Few if any of these monuments went through any of the approval procedures that we now commonly apply to public art. Contemporaries, especially African Americans, who objected to the erection of Confederate monuments had no realistic opportunity to voice their opposition. The fact that the monuments were erected in public spaces was one measure of the grip of white elites on all the levers of power. In simple terms, the monuments pointedly ignored the historical experience of the hundreds of thousands of North Carolinians, white and black, free and enslaved, who had opposed the Confederacy as well as the experience of the tens of thousands, white and black, who fought against it. One consequence of this intentional silencing of the African American and anti-Confederate history is a North Carolina landscape almost completely barren of monuments to either African Americans or white unionists.

The memorial landscape we have inherited is not sacred. Just as it was created by design and by means of grass-roots mobilization, it can be reimagined and rebuilt through the same means. And whereas the existing monuments were intended to perpetuate a political and racial ideology that is wholly incompatible with our constitutional and governing principles we have the opportunity to reimagine and build a memorial landscape that is inclusive, democratic, and consonant with our loftiest national aspirations. The goal is not the “erasure” of history but the removal of invidious symbols from the most important public spaces of our state, especially courthouses and other spaces essential to the creation and maintenance of a just and inclusive democracy.