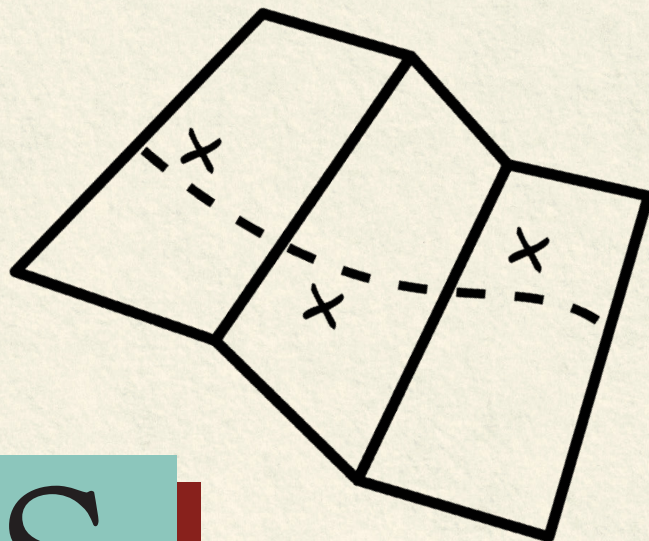


SIDE

TOURS



Visit a Foundry: What are they
bronzing now?



Who (and why) did we start putting
up statues in so many public squares?



WHERE DO WE PUT STATUES WE DON'T WANT ANYMORE?

(Who put them there in the first place?)



Local officials aren't sure exactly what to do with them—move them to a less prominent place, put them in a museum, maybe add a plaque for context.

The voice of an African American woman fills my car as I listen to a show on National Public Radio about what to do with disposed monuments—in particular Confederate monuments since the reporter, Audie Cornish, is asking about Civil War statues in towns like Richmond and Charlottesville. Who really wants a rejected enormous bronzed Jefferson Davis, former president of the Confederacy?

Not us, the speaker says, whom I later find out is Christy Coleman from the American Civil War Museum in Richmond, Virginia. She describes it as “problematic,” which means not only do all of these statues require care and resources, but most of them come with what she later refers to as “a false narrative.”

When towns take the statues down, they are also on some level

dismantling the narrative that surrounds that statue. Coleman’s colleague on the NPR show, Ben Wright, from the Briscoe Center for American History in Austin, Texas, provides some examples that towns try to provide more context on location, complete with talks, plaques, other statues.

“Davis, Lee, white supremacy, the end of Reconstruction, the Lost Cause. [We] were able to have those debates without necessarily spoon-feeding in a didactic way.”

Both speakers agree that simply adding a plaque to “clarify” things is never enough.

Ever.

But the show made me question who made the decisions to put these statues in public squares to begin with? They explained some of it during the interview—that in the 1890s through the 1910s, as Civil War veterans aged and wanted some sort of control over their legacy (especially in the South), there was a push to create impressive memorials in town squares. The statues moved from the cemetery from the park to the heart of the community in the most public space imaginable.

Coleman paused at one point to make clear that during this same period there was a huge effort to disenfranchise African Americans from voting. I remind myself while listening and driving that women still did not have the vote by 1910 (not until 1920) but African American males did.

Just think about all that was at stake: white men who fought in a losing cause in a great Civil War that cost more lives than all of our other wars combined still wanting to be honored for their courage, loyalty and brilliance in battle. And, then, disenfranchised white women, found they could wield considerable power as civic agents, and took the lead to celebrate the valor of white men, from whom they derived protection, property and family.

And they did a damn good job of it. There are more than 700 Confederate statues in the US I know firsthand after living and traveling in the South that there’s a statue to a generic Confederate soldier in hundreds of towns, often the exact same statue. In my former hometown of Alexandria, Virginia, the bronzed private with arms crossed, Confederate cap in hand, faced South towards Mount Vernon, home of American Revolutionary War General and our first President George Washington. It stood in a primary traffic circle for 131 years, until the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of George Floyd’s murder led to an aggressive uptick in the ongoing conversation to remove it. After years of waffling, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, who officially own the statue, worked with the town to remove it in June 2020.

It was while researching for a young adult biography on George Washington in the 1990s that I first learned about the vital role that white women—and groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy--played in many of the efforts to raise money and commission bronzed statues of “heroes” from both the Revolution and the Civil War.

“I was painfully distressed at the ruin and desolation of the home of Washington and the thought passed through my mind: Why was it that the women of his country did not try to keep it in repair?”

This is from a letter a southern woman wrote her daughter, Ann Pamela Cunningham, after steaming by Mount Vernon in 1853 on a ship on the Potomac River on her way to Philadelphia. The daughter went on to create the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, which still runs Washington’s estate to this day. Not the National Park Service. Not the state of Virginia. A ladies’ association eager to uphold a certain narrative about one of our founding fathers.

Back then, when I was on location almost 20 years ago, the ladies had not yet added much of anything about the slave quarters, but they have since.



A VIEW OF MOUNTVERNON THE SEAT OF GENERAL WASHINGTON.

After publishing a YA book on Mount Vernon, I received an invitation to return to the grounds as a general journalist in 1999. They had just opened a new Visitors' Center (controversial, because now instead of walking the grounds as they looked at Washington's time, you enter through a space with a food court, IMAX theater and huge gift shop). They planned to show us around the redesigned estate and press us to pen some stories that might draw in tourists.

It started with a lunch.

"We do not live in Virginia."

The wife of one of General Robert E. Lee's direct heirs tells me this as we eat a light salad in a rustic room complete with hard wooden chairs.

Of course, for anyone who knows even a little Civil War history the fact some descendants of the Confederate General Robert E. Lee intentionally fled the pressure of, well, being a direct descendent of Robert E. Lee, and now hide out far from the South shouldn't come as much of a surprise. The fact this conversation took place almost two decades before the controversy over the Lee statue in Charlottesville shows just how tough it's always been for families who have relatives that many treat as icons.

We continue our lunch and our quiet exchanges, most of which I cannot remember. It was clear she cared deeply about the general goal of protecting Mount Vernon as an historic site, but that the overall running of the place and the story was best left to professional curators, whom, since that moment in time have worked aggressively to bring the story of the estate's slaves to the forefront.

I do recall that same day I drove down the George Washington Parkway and decided to take in Robert E. Lee's old estate, now part of Arlington Cemetery. I made it up the hill to the front porch, which has an astounding view of the nation's capital, then I swung down to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Somehow the fact this monument was representational and honored all of the war dead whom we could not identify, made it feel less polarizing on every level. I could project onto the scene whatever feelings I might have about the people I've known who have served in America's wars from World War II to the more controversial Vietnam War.

The soldier's polished black heels click on the marble stones.

Despite the sizable crowd, I hear nothing else.

Click.

We all stare.



I begin to shake with emotion, somehow feeling the loss of my father when I was a young girl; he served in World War II in the Pacific arena. He died of cancer, not in the line of duty, but the sense of something given, of his service, of my grief all rise up in me.

The huge general monument touches me personally in a way that no statue of an individual ever has.

The emotion was so intense that even now, more than a decade later, while typing this I feel something sad.

Perhaps another key step to revising our public story lies in representational sculptures and monuments that encourage us to think in more sweeping terms rather than about one individual.

In 2018, Robert E. Lee V expressed precisely this sentiment when talking to *The Washington Post* about the violence in Charlottesville surrounding the statue to his great-great-great grandfather.

“If it can avoid any days like...Charlottesville, then take them [Confederate statues] down today.”

He willingly advocated for editing his own family narrative out of the public square.

