

CONFRONTING DIFFICULT HISTORY

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At Atlanta History Center, we use our historical collections, knowledgeable staff with a rich and nuanced understanding of history, and passion for our mission to connect people, history, and culture to work towards our goal of building a shared understanding of our collective history. Confronting difficult moments in the past that continue to influence our world today is never easy, but it is a vital part of developing an accurate, meaningful, and useful historical understanding.

In 2015, when a mass murderer motivated by white supremacist ideals killed nine African American church congregants in Charleston, South Carolina, communities across the country were horrified. Photos of the killer posing with Confederate symbols emerged, launching an intense debate over Civil War history and its continuing influence on our lives. Confederate monuments and symbols are directly related to what historians call “historical memory”—the way we choose to remember the past. Historians at Atlanta History Center thought critically about the role of public history in this debate, recognizing its complexity.

After extensive internal discussion, we decided that Atlanta History Center has a responsibility to engage in this debate about the meaning and presentation of history. We created an online [Confederate Monument Interpretation Guide](#) to inform evidence-based discussions about monuments in local communities and how to approach this issue. Through this online toolkit, we offered a contextualization marker template,

recommendations of quality scholarship, and latest updates from around the country. As the debate intensified, especially after the deadly rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, I was appointed by Atlanta’s Mayor and City Council as the co-chair of Atlanta’s advisory committee on Confederate monuments and street names. As an institution, we continued to hone our online toolkit, have conversations with communities around the country, and research case studies on this issue.

The tools on our website help explain the development of Civil War historical memory and how that process affects our present moment. After the conclusion of the war, faced with defeat and massive loss of life, many white Southerners sought to redefine the meaning of the war through a strain of historical memory referred to as the Lost Cause. The historical evidence is clear: slavery was the primary cause of secession and the Civil War. The Lost Cause instead posits that the Confederate states seceded because of their commitment to states’ rights only—omitting slavery from the narrative. This highly influential but largely inaccurate historical memory spread throughout the South and the rest of the country. At the same time, Jim Crow segregation laws were implemented nationwide.

Confederate monuments are tangible representations of this process. Many monuments to mourn the dead were erected immediately following the Civil War. The obelisk in Oakland Cemetery is one example. Yet most Confederate monuments were actually erected during the Jim Crow era.

Legalized segregation was implemented in a series of court battles, including the Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896 that legalized “separate but equal” accommodations based on race. During this time, monuments of triumphant Confederate generals astride horses and soldiers elevated on pedestals were erected in places of power and centers of community such as courthouses, state capitols, and town squares in hundreds of cities and towns across the United States.

Decades later, another spike in Confederate monument-building occurred during the Massive Resistance era following the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision outlawing school segregation. The largest Confederate monument ever is an example of a Massive Resistance monument. Two months after the landmark ruling, Georgia gubernatorial candidate Marvin Griffin made a campaign promise to purchase Stone Mountain and restart the Confederate memorial carving. In 1916, the Stone Mountain Confederate Memorial Association, a group with many ties to the Ku Klux Klan, commissioned a carving of Confederate leaders on the side of the mountain. That effort was abandoned in the late 1920s. Following Griffin’s election, in 1956 the state flag was altered to include the Confederate battle flag. In 1958, Stone Mountain was purchased by the state of Georgia. The carving was restarted in 1964 and completed in 1972.



In broad discussions about race and civil rights in America, we tend to talk about the Civil War and then jump 100 years to the Civil Rights movement. The Jim Crow and Massive Resistance eras have had long lasting impacts on our country today and were central to the creation of Confederate monuments. Without a full understanding of this time period, we cannot understand how and why Confederate monuments are problematic. If left unchallenged and not put into context, monuments can continue to promote inaccurate historical narratives, especially that of the Lost Cause. We take the position that providing evidence-based history to contextualize these monuments must be done, but we leave it up to local communities to determine the best solution through an intentional, community-driven process. In some cases, that solution might be large exhibition panels, like we did in Atlanta. In others, the solution might look like moving the monument to a more appropriate location or removing it altogether.

History belongs to everyone. Through constructive dialogue and civil, fact-based engagement together we can all explore historical truth, but this exploration must include both pleasant and unpleasant history in order to understand what made our country today. Confederate



monuments might provide one such topic for this exploration—using the online toolkit and scholarship, we at Atlanta History Center encourage thoughtful, inclusive, and historically grounded community discussions.

Through such community discussions and action, we can create trust, understanding, and the ability to work across differences.

IMAGES Atlanta History Center advised the City of Atlanta in the creation of exhibition panels placed near the Peace Monument in Piedmont Park (left) and the monument on Peachtree Battle Avenue (right). The fabrication and installation of these panels was made possible by a donor contribution to Atlanta History Center. These panels were the result of a 2017 City Advisory Committee, which made recommendations on these and other street names and monuments. Since Georgia state law prohibits monument removal, these monuments were contextualized with exhibition panels. Atlanta became the first city in a state that prohibits removal to contextualize Confederate monuments. Since the placement of the panels in August 2019, Decatur, Georgia and Franklin, Tennessee have placed contextualization markers near their Confederate monuments.