MONUMENTAL CONCERNS

Cities grapple with what to do about Confederate statues.

By JEFFREY GOODMAN

IN MAY 2017, as a band blared and police snipers scanned the jubilant crowd, a crane plucked a statue of Robert E. Lee from a towering fluted column in the center of New Orleans. A few blocks away, Mitch Landrieu, the white mayor of what was once America’s largest slave port, declared a new day for the Big Easy: “Now is the time to actually make this the city we always should have been had we gotten it right in the first place. . . . Anything less would render generations of courageous struggle and soul-searching a truly lost cause.”

Landrieu’s speech, widely praised for its eloquence and frankness, was a coda to a nearly two-year effort to remove four of the city’s Confederate monuments, spurred by the mass shooting at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in June 2015. In laying out a detailed and often personal argument against New Orleans’s memorials, Mayor Landrieu issued a call for other cities to reckon with their own difficult histories.

Many cities answered this call, renewing a debate around America’s estimated 700 public memorials, monuments, plaques, and fountains to the Confederacy. But in Charlottesville, Virginia, what began as a local discussion about statues descended into chaos, violence, and tragedy. Witnessing neo-Nazi chants in public parks, many Americans seemed taken aback that otherwise unremarkable pieces of stone and bronze were suddenly totems of white supremacy. For many others, these monuments had always stood for repression, subjugation, and a narrative of historical delusion; Charlottesville simply made the subtext into text.

The nationwide discussion of these monuments both mirrors and heightens the issues planners consider every day: how to frame complicated debates, how to serve a diverse public, how to craft urban spaces. Although the topic has attained a new urgency, the experiences of New Orleans and many other cities show how planners can turn community energy into action.

New narratives in NOLA

Back in July 2015, Mayor Mitch Landrieu stood before the New Orleans City Council to publicly ask that the city begin the legal process to remove four post-Reconstruction-era monuments: a 16-foot Robert E. Lee towering above the Mardi Gras parade route, a bronze

Jefferson Davis overlooking Canal Street, a seven-ton P.G.T. Beauregard at the entrance to City Park, and a small obelisk to the Battle of Liberty Place in the French Quarter. Ever hopeful, he claimed that "this discussion isn't about them"—the Confederates—"it's about us."

Still, the mayor relied on the particular histories of Confederate symbols to build a three-pronged argument to justify removal via a 1993 nuisance ordinance: one, that the people and events depicted were not worthy of their local prominence; two, that the intentions of the monuments themselves were to denigrate and demean; and three, that the symbols continue, today, to inspire hatred and bigotry.

The first point was easy enough to show. Researchers from the city found that Lee (probably) never visited New Orleans; Davis's main local achievement was dying on First Street in 1889; Beauregard ran the state lottery after the war but is depicted in his Confederate uniform; and the "Battle of Liberty Place" was more of a Reconstruction-era riot than a noble fight. New Orleans itself had been captured early in the Civil War, with its time in the Confederacy a blip in the city's history but a dominant theme in its public memorials.

The third point—that these monuments inspire hate and serve as symbols of intimidation today—was also relatively easy for New Orleans' mayor and city officials to advance. For decades, these monuments had been used as rally points by hate groups, neo-Nazis, and the Ku Klux Klan. Every city presentation on the removal issue prominently featured a picture of Rev. Avery Alexander—a local civil rights icon who has his own statue in town—being tackled by police officers at a Klan rally at the Liberty Place obelisk in 1993.

The 'Cult of the Lost Cause'

As a counterpoint to those who saw nothing in the monuments but long-venerated heroes, much of the planners' work centered on the question of intent: Why did New Orleanians choose these particular men, at that particular time, to venerate so publicly? The answer, as portrayed by New Orleans' planners and citizen advocates, lies in what historians call "The Cult of the Lost Cause."

Arising from the trauma of the Civil War, the Lost Cause rewrote the narrative of the rebellion to absolve the South for the sins of slavery and justify the imposition of Jim Crow. As the *Daily Picayune* wrote, in celebrating the dedication of New Orleans's Lee statue in 1884: "By every appliance of literature and art, we must show to all coming ages that with us, at least, there dwells no sense of guilt."

Planners from the city displayed this quote as part of a presentation given before every public meeting. This presentation argued, as one planner stated, that the statues were "physical manifestations of the Cult of the Lost Cause" that promoted "white supremacy." Rather than benign vessels of memory, city staff described the statues as vehicles of a particular ideology, one that cannot be separated from the difficult history of civil rights.

Most Confederate monuments in America—including three of the four Mayor Landrieu targeted in 2015—were erected in the 25 years following the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that legalized "separate but equal." Just as the gains of Reconstruction were being rolled back in the courthouse, the Lost Cause narrative was often being erected in the courthouse square, with evocations of the gallant South and heroic Confederates dominating public space.

In doing so, the narrative of abolition—that of the millions of slaves and their history—was simply ignored, often in favor of the glorification of rebel minutiae like Shreveport, Louisiana's shrine to "the last spot where the Confederate flag was lowered on land," or the University of Texas's statue to the postmaster general of the Confederacy. While a segregated New Orleans built monuments along Jefferson Davis Parkway, the site where Homer Plessy was arrested for boarding a whites-only train on Press Street would not get a marker until 2009.

As the quote from the *Daily Picayune* shows, the intention of these monuments to the people who erected them was clear from the beginning: to advance the Lost Cause, and to denigrate and intimidate any opposition. Around the country, contemporary sources often did not mince words about their goals of memorialization. In Tampa Bay, Florida, the keynote speaker at their monument's unveiling in 1911 declared the obelisk stood for a South that believes any "president who appoints a negro to an office . . . [is] a traitor to the Anglo-Saxon race." The program from the dedication of Richmond's monument to Jefferson Davis identifies the top figure as the Vindicatrix, the goddess of the South's ultimate vindication.

As the memory of these words faded, many statues became just another piece of the visual landscape of America's cities, their original intent forgotten, their existence unquestioned.

Despite the documentation provided by city

MAYOR MITCH LANDRIEU'S SPEECH

The New Orleans mayor spoke on May 19, 2017, after the city's last Confederate monuments were removed.

LISTEN

youtu.be/WQ29Uwz5yPU

BYTHENUMBERS

The Southern Povery Law Center catalogued Confederate place names, monuments, and other symbols in 2016. They include:

718
monuments and statues, nearly 300 of which are in Georgia, Virginia, or North Carolina

109
public schools named for Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, or other Confederate icons

80
counties and cities named for Confederates

9
official Confederate holidays in six states

10
U.S. military bases named for Confederates

SOURCE: SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER

Dig Deeper

Don't miss out! The NPC18 track **PLANNING FOR INCLUSIVENESS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE** will highlight more on this topic: planning.org/npc.

REMOVING MONTANA'S CONFEDERATE FOUNTAIN

A MODEST STONE FOUNTAIN, erected in 1916 in Helena, Montana's Hill Park, may have escaped notice entirely if not for its inscription: "A Loving Tribute to Our Confederate Soldiers."

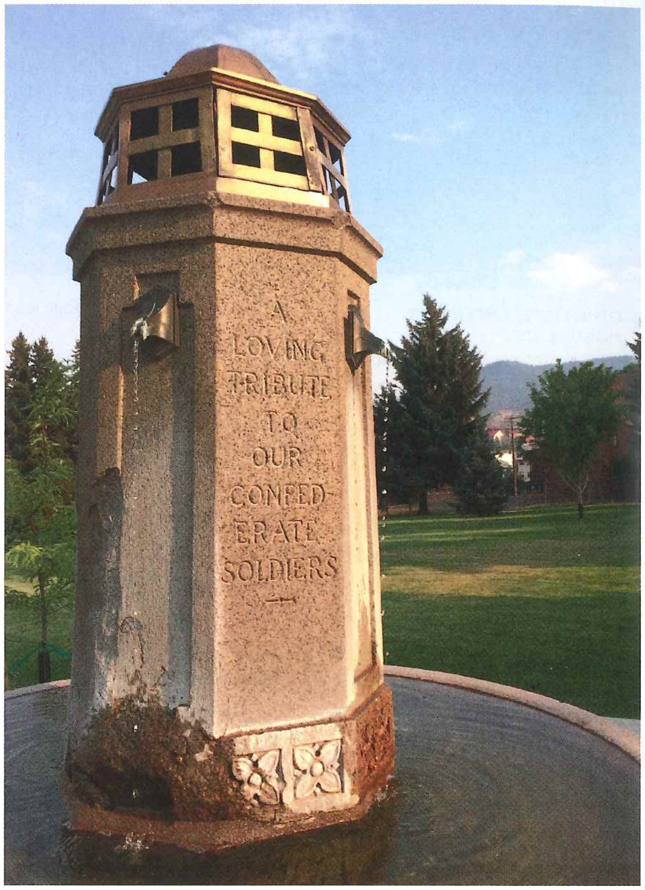
The fountain was donated by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, a women's group that played a prominent role in spreading Lost Cause memorials around America in the decades following Reconstruction.

Their efforts created such a sudden desire to inscribe the Confederacy on the landscape that companies started mass-producing monuments as mail-order kits. Towns could, for $450, buy a life-size soldier cast in "white bronze," or cheap zinc rebranded. (When protestors pulled down Durham, North Carolina's "bronze" statue in August, the ease by which it crumpled led to doubts about its composition.)

Discussion of Helena's Memorial Fountain—the only public Confederate monument for over a thousand miles, located in a city that did not exist at the start of the Civil War—divided the city commission and local preservationists. In dueling letters to the editor, Commissioner Andres Haladay called the fountain "a one-sided celebration of revisionist history" that "cannot be disentangled from . . . celebrations of violence, separatism and racism," while the city's heritage preservation officer Pam Attardo claimed it "was meant to beautify a park and commemorate [the] dead, not spread hate," and that alterations would cause the Confederacy to "disappear from history."

In 2015, the city decided to erect an explanatory sign to contextualize the monument, the content of which further divided decision makers. Some council members wanted an open condemnation of the Confederacy based on Helena's nondiscrimination ordinance, while others favored more neutral language, arguing a strong statement would exacerbate tensions.

Stuffed with details and caveats, the initial draft was too long—because public signage must follow the Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines for legibility, the "small interpretive plaque" would need to be a six-by-eight-foot billboard to fit everything. So back to the committee the sign went. And while Helena's government attempted to find a solution, the process stalled—then took on new urgency after the shootings in Charleston, Virginia.



The United Daughters of the Confederacy donated Helena's Memorial Fountain in 1916. The city removed the fountain on August 18, 2017.

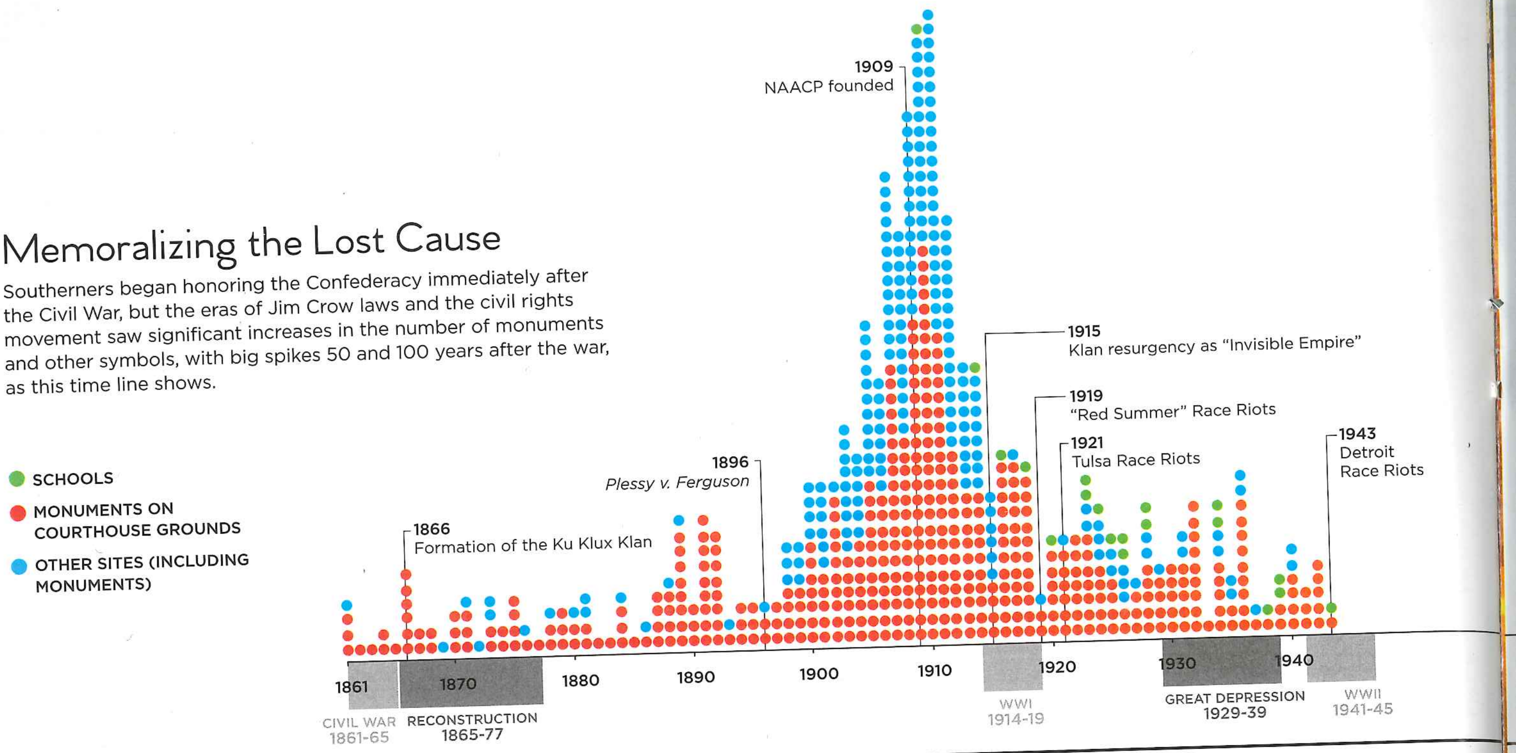
PHOTO COURTESY ACLU OF MONTANA

Pushed by state representatives, local activists, and a flurry of editorials, Helena's local government held an administrative meeting in August. Concerns for public safety were evident.

"I believe that if the fountain remains in the park there will likely be a confrontation where high emotions coupled with strong beliefs spill over into violence," Commissioner Dan Ellison said at the meeting.

Other commissioners, while acknowledging the recontextualization effort of 2015, were unwavering in their belief that the inherent racism of the fountain was the real issue. "I think we have an obligation to take it down," Commissioner Robert Farris-Olsen said. "I wish we would have two years ago."

Though no official vote was taken, the city commission directed staff to drop the signage effort and remove the Memorial Fountain. Three days later, a crane—defended by a handful of police officers—disassembled the fountain, which is now stored in an undisclosed city warehouse.



Memoralizing the Lost Cause

Southerners began honoring the Confederacy immediately after the Civil War, but the eras of Jim Crow laws and the civil rights movement saw significant increases in the number of monuments and other symbols, with big spikes 50 and 100 years after the war, as this time line shows.

SOURCE: SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER; PHOTO BY CNP/GETTY IMAGES

staff, as the "monuments issue" worked its way through the historic district landmarks commission, the human rights commission, the planning commission, and onto the docket of the city council, standing-room-only crowds largely talked past each other.

Some people accused the mayor and local activists of "opening healed wounds" and sowing division, arguing that the monuments had been accepted for generations until the mayor sought to distract the public from his own administration's troubles. Other activists doubted politicians' commitment to the cause of removing monuments to white supremacy, including—in their view—the statue of slave owner and "Indian killer" Andrew Jackson in Jackson Square. The debate grew so heated, so personal, that the *Times-Picayune*'s website simply locked down all commenting on monuments articles.

Still, as writer Jamelle Bouie would tweet, "people are beginning to understand that the 'consensus' of the past wasn't really a consensus at all." After hearing the city's presentation, Historic District Landmarks Commission member John Deveney admitted, "These statues have never bothered me, but that's because I've been ignorant as well."

Statues as a 'nuisance'

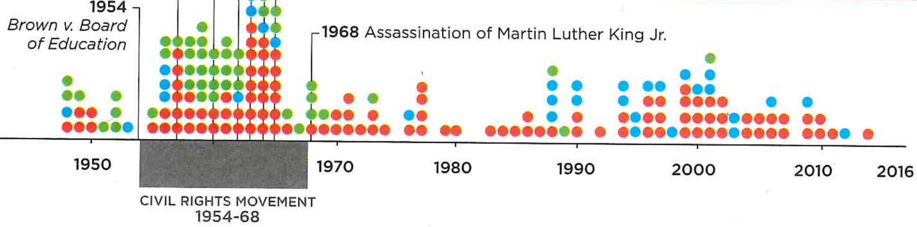
While protestors rallied around the colossal statue of Robert E. Lee, it would be the most obscure of the monuments, an unadorned obelisk hidden behind a parking garage in the French Quarter, that would allow Mayor Landrieu's effort to succeed.

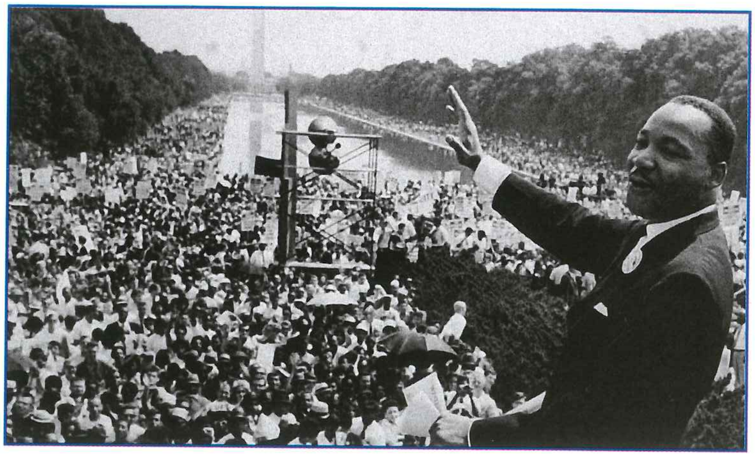
The obelisk memorialized the Reconstruction-era Battle of Liberty Place, an attempted coup of the state government by members of the Crescent City White League, a paramilitary group of ex-Confederates. The battle left 32 people dead, including members of the integrated Metropolitan Police.

Erected on Canal Street to "commemorate the uprising" of the White League, later inscriptions threw all pretense to history or heritage aside, declaring that the election of 1876 "recognized white supremacy in the South and gave us our state." (A halfhearted attempt at recontextualization would be added later, honoring Americans "on both sides.") It was, as numerous officials would note, the "only monument in the country celebrating the murder of police."

The Liberty Place monument had already been briefly removed in 1989 before a lawsuit filed by former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke forced its rededication. The rededication ceremony, featuring Duke in his Klan robes and protested by civil rights activists, was a riot of fights and arrests.

As part of the legal maneuvering to keep the monument in storage, the city council passed an ordinance allowing the city to declare monuments public nuisances if they met three criteria: "Praises a subject at odds with the message of equal rights under the law; has been or may become the site of violent demonstrations; and constitutes an expense to maintain that outweighs its historic importance."





It was this 1993 law that Mayor Landrieu called on following the events in Charleston. Though mayors stretching back to the 1980s had argued for removals, and local activists had pressured the school board to rename buildings honoring slave owners since the 1990s, the issue—and the ordinance—had not been pressed. Finally, in December 2015, after speeches by Mayor Landrieu and each council member, New Orleans declared all four monuments to be public nuisances and ordered them removed.

But the statues did not move.

Following the council vote, self-proclaimed "monument defenders" launched a fusillade of lawsuits, claiming the city did not own the monuments, or the move broke historic protection laws, or—boldly—that the Lee statue's 14th Amendment rights had been violated.

More troubling were the threats. Crane operators who even downloaded the city's RFP faced angry phone calls and emails; one had his car torched. Armed protesters—Louisiana is an open-carry state—camped beside the Jefferson Davis statue across from a kindergarten. A peaceful march by the anti-monument group Take 'Em Down NOLA urging the city to expedite the monuments' removal was met at Lee Circle by a counterdemonstration of neo-Confederates, alt-right protestors, and white nationalists.

After 15 months of inaction—longer than the city was in the Confederacy itself—New Orleans city workers in tactical vests, guarded by dozens of police officers, dismantled the monuments as (mostly) pleased crowds watched. The statues now lord over a city junkyard until a suitable destination can be found.

What's next?

Since Charlottesville, cities like Baltimore and Chapel Hill, North Carolina, have appealed to public safety as the reason to forgo a deliberative approach. The threat of monuments as sites of violence—and New Orleans's $2.1 million cost of security and logistics—encourages city executives to act decisively, if sometimes in a manner that's contradictory. Both Orlando, Florida, and St. Louis sent their statues to museums and private cemeteries; Madison, Wisconsin, and Los Angeles moved plaques from graveyards to storage. Gainesville, Florida, and Kansas City, Missouri, simply returned century-old donations to the current chapters of the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

In New Orleans, the city government laid out a strict set of guidelines: the statues could only go to nonprofit or government institutions; they had to be displayed with contextualizing information explaining the Lost Cause ideology; and—because they were now officially nuisances—they could not be on public property in Orleans Parish. For Landrieu, "proper context" meant banishment from the public square, but not destruction; or as he called it, "remembrance, not reverence."

Now that the monuments are gone, New Orleans and other cities are left to grapple with an even more difficult issue: What's next? And how will they decide on a new narrative, one that commemorates America and its cities' own difficult journeys?

Today, more than ever before, planners must confront the past to shape the future. ■

Jeffrey Goodman is a planner and designer based in New Orleans. His research focuses on short-term rental policy, regulating the sharing economy, and public history.