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For a Black Man Hired to Undo a Confederate Legacy, It Has Not Been Easy

Devon Henry and his company have taken down 23 monuments in the South, including the infamous Robert E. Lee statue in Virginia, in part because few others were interested.



Devon Henry stands among the pieces of a pedestal that once held a statue of Robert E. Lee in Richmond. His general contracting company has hauled away 15 pieces of Confederate statuary in the city.

By Matt Stevens

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RICHMOND, Va. — As Devon Henry and his construction team take down the last remnants of statues that long dotted this former capital of the Confederacy, they have developed a grim game.

Random passers-by, some in vehicles, others on foot, often make known their disapproval of Mr. Henry's work — so often, in fact, that Mr. Henry, who is Black, began to keep count of the many times he or a Black crew member were called an incendiary racial slur.

The count is 72 and climbing, according to Mr. Henry, who has emerged as the go-to statue remover not only for this city, but for all of Virginia and other parts of the South.

Statue removal has become a lucrative line of work amid the ongoing national reckoning over traumas past and present. But in Richmond, where a 21-foot figure of Robert E. Lee towered over the city for more than a century, officials say no amount of government pleading produced a candidate interested in dismantling the city's many monuments during the tense and sometimes violent days of summer 2020.

Except for Mr. Henry.

He and his general contracting company, Team Henry Enterprises, have hauled away 15 pieces of Confederate statuary in Richmond and a total of 23 monuments across the Southeast in less than two years.

But the work has come with considerable personal risk: Mr. Henry, 45, has been repeatedly threatened, carries a firearm and often wears a bulletproof vest on job sites.

"You start thinking, Damn, was it worth it?" Mr. Henry said. "But then there are moments; my daughter, in her interview for college, said I was her hero."



Hundreds of supporters witnessed the removal of the Lee statue. But Mr. Henry's work to dismantle that and other statues also led to his crew being subjected to racial slurs.

From New York to North Carolina, more than 400 Confederate symbols have been relocated, renamed or removed in recent years at costs that sometimes run into the millions.

Mr. Henry has become one of the most reliable contractors willing and able to take on the work. But the removals are more than just a way to boost his bottom line. In

dismantling the Lee statue, he said, some suggested he was fulfilling a prophecy from 1890.

In an issue published that year, John Mitchell Jr., the editor of *The Richmond Planet*, a Black newspaper, wrote of the Black man's role in the statue's history: "He put up the Lee monument, and should the time come, will be there to take it down."

Mr. Henry's mother, Freda Thornton, said she, too, recognized the significance of her son's role and came to watch him work.

"I prayed the whole time," she said. "I thought about my dad. I thought about the people — the shoulders that Devon stood on, to do the job he was doing."

Mr. Henry credits his mother, who was 16 and living in public housing when she had him, with instilling in him a sense of drive and commitment. From an entry level job at McDonald's, she worked her way up the golden arches, and eventually came to own five of the fast-food franchises.

Mr. Henry was the first in his family to graduate from college, an educational journey that started at Robert E. Lee Elementary School in Hampton, Va. (The school is now closed and the campus has been renamed.) He rose through the ranks of General Electric before buying his company in 2006. The business specialized then in erosion and sediment control, but its name, *The Silty Lady*, conjured other thoughts in some callers and was eventually changed, Mr. Henry said.



The statue of Stonewall Jackson was the first to be removed in Richmond under the \$1.8 million contract awarded to Team Henry Enterprises.

Since its expansion into general contracting, Team Henry Enterprises has been awarded more than \$100 million in federal contracts and is expert in many areas, Mr. Henry said.

But no one at Team Henry had ever considered dismantling a bronze and stone sculpture of a Confederate general until the office of Virginia's governor, Ralph Northam, called in June 2020. In the days after the death of George Floyd, protesters had flooded the streets, a bus had been set on fire and the Richmond police had tear-gassed a crowd of demonstrators, city officials recalled in interviews.

The governor had survived accusations a year earlier that he had appeared in blackface in a college yearbook photo. Now he decided the Lee statue needed to go.

"Nobody would take this job," said Clark Mercer, the former chief of staff for Mr. Northam, a Democrat whose term ended in January. "Some of the folks who were asked to take it down were pretty overtly racist with their comments back."

Mr. Henry talked to his family and his staff. He knew that in New Orleans, a contractor with an agreement to take down city monuments had his car destroyed in a fire; and that in Charlottesville, a rally to protest that city's plan to take down its own statue of Lee had led to violence.

Mr. Henry thought for a day, then agreed to take the job.

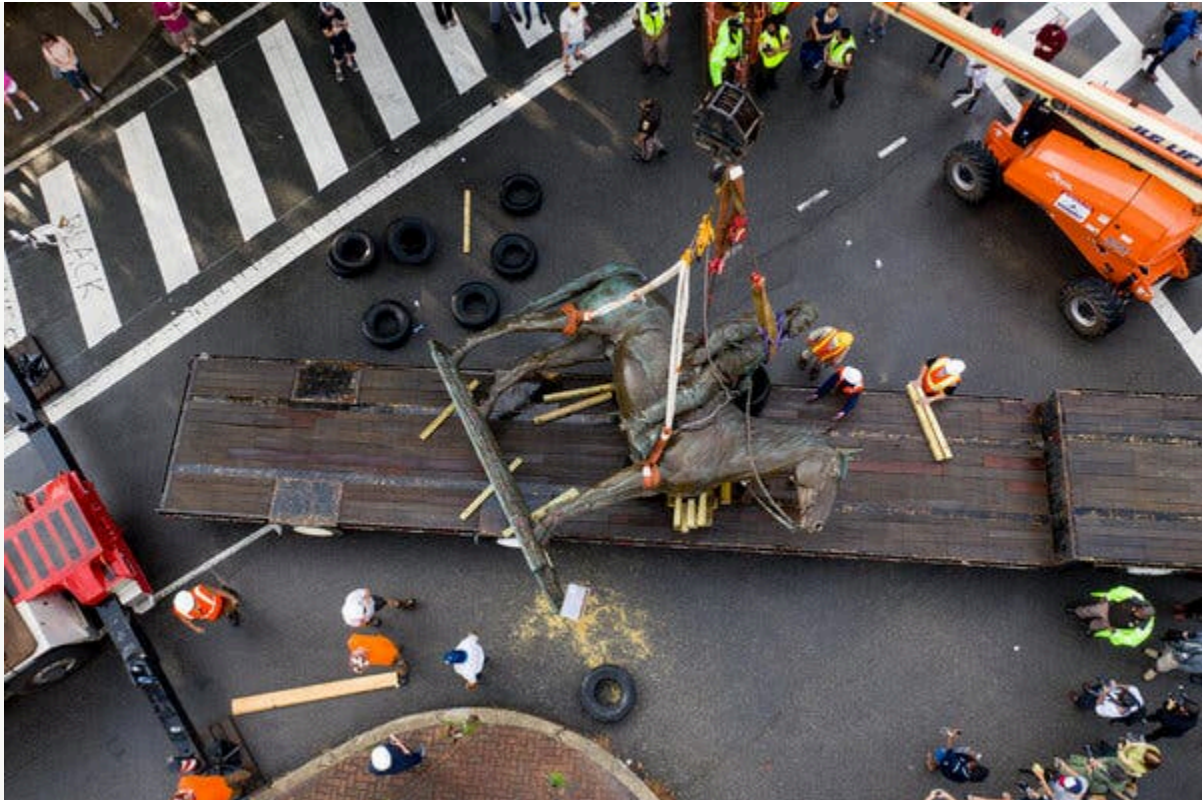
Because of a legal dispute, it would be more than a year before the Lee statue could be removed. But in the meantime, the city of Richmond decided it was time to remove its Confederate iconography. Frustrated protesters had already begun trying to pull down some of the statues, and the city said that posed immediate safety risks.

City officials said that they made dozens of calls to contractors up and down the East Coast. But finding a qualified firm that could build a team with all of the necessary equipment and expertise was challenging from the outset. And some contractors refused to get involved because they were worried about potential backlash and the safety of their crews, according to emails and other public records reviewed by The New York Times.

Only Mr. Henry stepped up.

"It takes courage to put yourself out front and expose not only your business, not only your reputation, but also your family as well," said Richmond's mayor, Levar Stoney, who used his emergency powers to award the contract.

In an effort to shield his family and staff, Mr. Henry and the city said they agreed that the \$1.8 million contract to remove about a dozen pieces of Confederate iconography would be awarded to a shell company he created, NAH LLC, instead of his Team Henry.



Contractors are tasked with removing Confederate statues with great care. The Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia will determine what to do with Richmond's statues long-term.

But the work was later traced back to Mr. Henry by The Richmond Times-Dispatch, which reported that he had given Mr. Stoney and his political action committee contributions totaling \$4,000 since 2016. Kimberly Gray, a member of the Richmond City Council and a Stoney rival, called for an investigation into the awarding of the contract, which was also unsuccessfully challenged in court. A special prosecutor assigned to investigate the award process later cleared the mayor of wrongdoing.

Mr. Henry called the investigation “ridiculous,” and added, “There was nothing nefarious going on.” Asked to comment on the dispute, Ms. Gray, who lost to Mr. Stoney in Richmond’s 2020 mayoral election, said only that the removal work “should have cost much less than it did.”

With the first removal planned for July 1, 2020, security loomed as an unresolved concern. The city attorney believed the mayor did not actually have the authority to expedite the removal of the monuments under emergency protocols and the Richmond Police Department opted not to participate, fearing that it could be cited for acting illegally.

Turning to the sheriff’s department for help was another option. But the city sheriff, Antionette V. Irving, was unsure whether it was wise to get involved, Mr. Henry and city officials recalled. Mr. Henry and Sheriff Irving attended the same church. So at one point, Mr. Henry took a selfie with the sheriff and sent it to their pastor, Dr. Lance Watson of Saint Paul’s Baptist Church, in hopes the pastor might give the sheriff a nudge.

Sheriff Irving agreed on the afternoon of the first removal to deploy deputies to help protect Mr. Henry and his team as they began to dismantle a monument to the Confederate general Stonewall Jackson. Since 1919, it had stood along Monument Avenue, a thoroughfare studded with homages to leaders of the Confederacy.

As much as the city had sought haste, statue removal is not at all the same as demolition work. Even monuments now devalued as symbols are often dismantled with immense care. In the case of the Jackson statue, Team Henry initially could not locate the bolts they needed to cut so as to detach it from its pedestal.

But once all of the preparations were in place, the scene played out “like a movie,” Mr. Henry said. In a pouring rain, as a church bell — nearly melted down into Confederate weaponry during the Civil War — rang in the background, a crane sent the Jackson statue airborne. Hundreds of people erupted into cheers — and tears.



As seen from above, hundreds of pieces of what was the pedestal for the statue of Robert E. Lee in Richmond are now in storage.

Mr. Henry’s company removed other Confederate statues, cannons and assorted items from Richmond over the next nine days. Some white-owned subcontractors helped him while others didn’t want any role. And things got nasty.

Someone posted Mr. Henry’s address online, he said. On social media, people inquired about the route he drove to his office and asked exactly what kind of bulletproof vest he wore. Threatening fliers from people purporting to be part of the K.K.K. were discovered in county districts just outside Richmond. One subcontractor reported that drivers yelling slurs attempted to run his company’s semi-trucks off the road.

But Mr. Henry persevered. His company removed Confederate monuments in Charlottesville, including the Lee statue there, and quietly whisked away other iconography outside Virginia before returning to Richmond to deconstruct the pedestals on which the statues once sat. The dismantled pieces from the Richmond statues are headed to the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, which will determine what to do with them long-term.

On Monument Avenue today, there are still flowering trees, grassy medians and regal brick homes, but the traffic circles that once held Confederate figures are filled instead with succulents. The spot where the Stonewall Jackson statue stood has been paved over with asphalt.

The only Confederate statue left is that of Gen. A.P. Hill. Its removal is authorized under the contract, but the work has been complicated by the fact that his remains are buried beneath it. Negotiations with the Hill family are ongoing, city officials said.

Mr. Henry plans to commemorate his team's work by selling custom-made NFTs depicting 13 of the statues and other items that his team took down; he will donate the money from the sales to social causes. It is a new kind of art for the 21st century that will replace that which is past its time, he said.

Another new creation in which Mr. Henry has played a pivotal role is the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers at the University of Virginia, 70 miles down the road. Mr. Henry's team oversaw the construction of the monument, which was dedicated last spring.

So even as Mr. Henry helped to discard painful relics of one chapter of Virginia's history, he helped to cement the legacy of another too important to still be ignored.

"They can't erase what we've done," he said.