The New York Times

Guest Essay

America's Ugliest Confederate Statue Is Gone. Racism Isn't.

Jan. 17, 2022

The pedestal of the former site of the statue of Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest in Nashville, Tenn.

By Margaret Renkl

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NASHVILLE — God knows I didn't visit the Tennessee State Museum last week to pay my respects to the bust of Nathan Bedford Forrest, but while I was there I

figured I might as well take a look. It's been quite a year for the Confederate general, slave trader and grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

In June, Forrest's remains were disinterred from their burial site in Memphis and transported across the state to the new National Confederate Museum in Columbia. The transfer was the result of years of activists' efforts to rid largely Black Memphis — where Martin Luther King Jr., of course, was assassinated — of any remnants of Forrest's legacy there.

"It's like a burden has been lifted," Van D. Turner, a Shelby County commissioner, told The Associated Press. "It just gives us breath."

The next month, the giant bust of Forrest was removed from the Tennessee State Capitol, where it has been generating controversy since it was installed in 1978. It was reinstalled in the Tennessee State Museum in a small temporary gallery adjacent to a permanent exhibition about Tennessee's role in the Civil War and Reconstruction. Forrest's role as a slave trader and Ku Klux Klan leader, among other depredations, is clearly explained in the permanent exhibition, and this historical context is very different from the place of honor the bust occupied in the Capitol. Visitors to the Tennessee State Museum, learn exactly who Nathan Bedford Forrest really was and exactly which evil he fought to preserve.

Which brings us to December and the glorious defeat finally met by the most hideous monument to Nathan Bedford Forrest in all the land. You don't have to take my word for this. It's "The Worst Confederate Statue We've Ever Seen," according to Mother Jones. New York magazine called it "America's Ugliest Confederate Statue." The Washington Post noted that the statue's eyes have "an axe-murderer vibe."

The malformed Confederate figure seated atop a malformed rearing horse was erected on private land in 1998 and surrounded by Confederate battle flags. Visible to anyone entering Nashville on I-65, the eyesore was a frequent target of vandalism. When someone splashed pink paint all over it in 2017, the owner, Bill Dorris, opted not to repair it because the new coat of paint, he said, would bring the statue even more attention.

Mr. Dorris died in late 2020. He left $5 million to his dog. He also left a small building and the flag display to the Sons of Confederate Veterans. Everything else, including the Forrest statue, goes to the Battle of Nashville Trust, a historic preservation group. Last month, the statue was removed unexpectedly. According to a statement from the trust, it was "ugly and a blight on Nashville" and detracted from the trust's mission.

The glee at its fall was instant and widespread. "This has been a national embarrassment," State Senator Heidi Campbell, a Democrat from Nashville, told The Tennessean. "I'm so excited. This is great news. It's just so hurtful to people, not to mention it's heinously ugly."

Taking down offensive memorials isn't the only way to begin to correct public representations of our heinous past. Some communities have responded to defenders of Confederate monuments by erecting competing memorials to those who fought to

preserve the Union or to make it more just, especially during the civil rights era. In Nashville, the Metro Council voted last month to name the plaza in front of Historic Nashville Courthouse after the civil rights activist Diane Nash. A month earlier the school board voted to name a new high school after the Rev. James Lawson, a key organizer of nonviolent resistance in Nashville.

In October, the neighboring city of Franklin installed "March to Freedom," a life-size monument to the United States Colored Troops, some 180,000 strong, who fought on behalf of the Union. The statue of one of those soldiers, a group that included many who had been enslaved, was erected on the same public square as a monument to an unnamed Confederate soldier set atop a towering pedestal that has long inspired furious debate.

The new statue stands in the same area where a slave market once stood. "You can hear all these romanticized, 'Gone With the Wind' stories of slavery, but here is the

reality: Where you are standing, men, women, boys and girls were bought like cattle," the Rev. Kevin Riggs told The Times at the monument's unveiling. "This happened."

The Tennessee Heritage Protection Act, passed in 2013, makes it nearly impossible to take down a Confederate monument here. Franklin's "Fuller Story Project," which includes five other historical markers chronicling the experience of enslaved people in Franklin, attempts to compensate. New monuments with the same aims are in the works or already stand in Boston; Natchez, Miss.; and Wilmington, N.C., among many others.

But memorials to the Black soldiers who fought to preserve the Union, necessary as they are, don't obviate the need to remove memorials to white soldiers who fought to preserve slavery. And honoring the descendants of former slaves doesn't eradicate a racist hatred that still festers and often erupts, these days, in full view of the public.

Sure, the act of taking down a memorial — like the act of putting one up — is largely symbolic. But such symbols are powerful reminders of what we treasure and what we repudiate. It is not too much to say that symbols tell us who we are.

So it matters that children growing up in Franklin, Tenn., can now visit a town square that acknowledges Black history and honors Black sacrifice. It matters that the remains of Nathan Bedford Forrest are no longer interred in Memphis, where he fought to preserve vast plantations run on enslaved labor. "Having him there was like having him dance on our graves, the graves of our ancestors," Memphis City Council member Michalyn Easter-Thomas told The Times.

Walking out the doors of the Tennessee State Museum last week, I had a clear view of the State Capitol, dead ahead. It was the first day of the new legislative session, where the Republican supermajority of the Tennessee General Assembly is poised to divide Tennessee's two Democratic districts — Shelby County, where Memphis is, and Davidson County, where Nashville is — in a way that deliberately dilutes the voting power of Black and brown voters. In the states of the former Confederacy, a ludicrously gerrymandered map like this one is ample evidence that racism is not even close to being a relic of the past.

On Martin Luther King's Birthday, and every day, we need to topple Confederate statues from their pedestals, but we need to do much, much more than that, too. The work of justice is far from done. But to go forward, we must find a truthful way to look back.

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