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Statue of limitations: Thomas Jefferson to be removed from New York council chambers



The 1833 statue of Thomas Jefferson will be removed from New York's City Hall Council Chamber.

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New York: For more than 100 years, a 215-centimetre statue of Thomas Jefferson has towered over members of the New York City Council in their chamber at City Hall, a testament to his role as one of the nation's Founding Fathers and the primary author of the Declaration of Independence.

But for the last two decades, some black and Latino council members, citing Jefferson's history as a slaveholder, called for the statue to be banished – a push that gained significant momentum in the last year as the nation has broadly reconsidered public monuments that can be viewed as symbols of systemic racism.

On Monday, city officials voted unanimously to remove the statue from council chambers but delayed a decision on where to put it.

“There are 700 pieces of art under our jurisdiction. We cannot make a rash decision that will set a precedent for the other 699 pieces of artwork that may also have challenges from people or other groups of people,” Signe Nielsen, president of the Public Design Commission, which oversees art at city-owned property, said at a public hearing before the vote.

The relocation of the statue, requested by the council's black, Latino and Asian Caucus, was expected to be a *fait accompli*: An agreement was already in place to relocate the statue to the New-York Historical Society.

The society had agreed to present the statue in a historical context that captured Jefferson's legacy as a Founding Father but also as a man who enslaved more than 600 people and fathered six children with one of them, Sally Hemings.

The unexpected delay angered some black and Latino lawmakers, who had expected the statue to be moved from City Hall because, as the caucus said in a letter to the mayor, it serves as "a constant reminder of the injustices that have plagued communities of colour since the inception of our country".

There have been various attempts to remove the statue; two decades ago, a call to banish the statue gained attention but went nowhere.

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"Jefferson embodies some of the most shameful parts of our country's history," Adrienne Adams, a councilwoman from Queens and co-chair of the caucus, said at the hearing.

The debate over the Jefferson statue is part of a broad, nationwide reckoning over racial inequality highlighted by the murder of George Floyd, the racial disparities further revealed by the coronavirus pandemic, and the sometimes violent debate over whether Confederate monuments should be toppled and discarded.

The unanimous decision by the commission to remove the statue from the chamber but not rule out moving it to another location in City Hall illustrates the complexity of such debates.

"This is an issue that is not going to be simple to explicate, excavate or decide," said Commissioner Merryl H. Tisch, who suggested shelving the motion for further research. She later floated the idea of displaying the statue at the New York Public Library, next to a copy of the Declaration of Independence.