



COUNCIL ON AMERICA'S MILITARY PAST - U.S.A.

PRESERVING, INTERPRETING AND SHARING OUR MILITARY HERITAGE

presents

The Persistent Preservationist December 2022

Editor's Note:

Welcome! During the past couple of years, I have focused our newsletter mostly on museums and how they adapted to the pandemic. I'm switching gears slightly to take a look at a related issue about a kind of artifact usually displayed outdoors that has stirred controversy. My focus is local in this article that I have written myself. I welcome any feedback, especially if anyone wants to know what I think ought to be done with the memorial in Arlington cemetery and why.

The original Persistent Preservationist was a most excellent newsletter produced by CAMP member Col. Hal Youmans, USA (Ret).

We welcome suggestions for stories or sites to cover.

— Nick Reynolds, Editor, history-maker@comcast.net

Confederate Memorials and Monuments in Virginia

If you have ever wondered how relevant historic preservation is to current events, come to Virginia, which remains one of the epicenters of controversy over what to do with Confederate memorials and monuments of various sorts. In my hometown of Arlington, Lee Highway became Langston Boulevard in 2021. A hundred miles away in Richmond, a centrally-located public monument to the dynamic Confederate general A. P. Hill came down in late 2022, leading to follow-on discussions: where to reinter his remains that lay under his statue and what to do with the statue itself. In the Tidewater town of Matthews, a heated debate remains unsettled. It is over whether to deed the land under a public Confederate monument to a private entity so that it can never be removed.

One nearby dispute can teach us a great deal as preservationists, historians, and citizens. It is over a Confederate memorial that is on Federal land in a quiet corner of Arlington National Cemetery. To the uninitiated (which included me until recently) it seems odd that there is a Confederate memorial in a cemetery established as a burial ground for Union dead. The answer lies in decisions taken around 1900, when a small number of Confederates (eventually rising to about 400) were reburied in Arlington in a gesture of national unity. In 1906 the United Daughters of the Confederacy began raising money to erect a memorial to the dead in the cemetery, a plan realized in 1914 with a classical bronze female figure standing high on a 35-foot pedestal, unveiled by President Woodrow Wilson. This memorial is anything but simple and conveys numerous messages. Idealized carvings honor not just Confederate soldiers but the Confederacy itself. Two panels show slaves who appear to be supporting their masters as they go off to war. A Latin inscription honors conservative values.

There are layers of complication to this slice of history. One is that the cemetery remained segregated until President Truman desegregated the military in 1948. Until then, Confederate and Union dead could be buried near each other but only so long as they were white. The other is that between 1903 and 2009, every American president sent a wreath to the Confederate section on Confederate Memorial Day, June 7. President Obama modified but did not end the practice; he sent the traditional wreath to the Confederate section but directed that another wreath be sent to the African-American Civil War Memorial which is not in Arlington but in downtown Washington.

The cemetery has offered an excellent narrative about these issues through signage and on-line (<https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Explore/Monuments-and-Memorials/Confederate-Memorial>), concluding not unreasonably that “the history of the Confederate Memorial embodies the complex and contested legacy of the Civil War at Arlington National Cemetery, and in American culture generally.” The unknown narrator, probably an official historian, invites visitors to view the memorial as “an opportunity ... to reflect on the history and meanings of the Civil War, slavery, and the relationship between military service, citizenship and race in America.” After reading these lines, I supposed that, in that spirit, the cemetery was willing to let it stand.

But the Pentagon has recently directed the Army, which oversees the cemetery, to remove the memorial, apparently because its content is objectionable. The Pentagon’s directive will lead to further discussions under the National Historic Preservation Act that mandates an opportunity for public comment. The sculptor’s descendants believe that the memorial should be removed and destroyed, while others argue that it should be preserved, but not in a public setting.

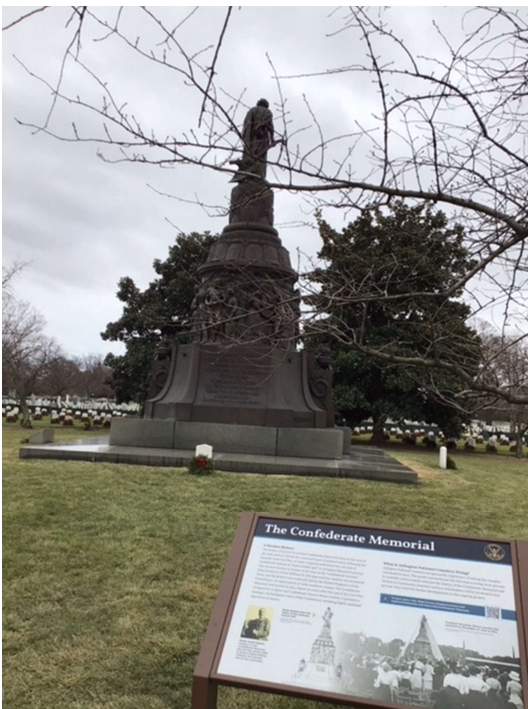
So what to make of all this? I offer a few guidelines.

—It matters where a monument or memorial is and what its message appears to be. Is it prominently displayed on public property? Does it simply honor the dead? Does it also promote a particular cause? If so, does it do so in an appropriate way?

—Does the monument or memorial have value as a historic artifact? If the decision is to take it down, should it be preserved and displayed elsewhere? If so, where?

—Decisions and actions must not be taken unilaterally or arbitrarily. It benefits no-one to vandalize or desecrate a monument or memorial, or to attack those who do not agree with you. While majorities will usually carry the day, there must be an opportunity for minorities to air their views.

Call me Pollyanna but I say the goal here is not to impose solutions but instead to advance historical understanding. Everyone will never agree but if we historians do our job right, more people will find common ground and come to terms with the past.



A photo by your correspondent of the controversial Confederate Memorial located in a quiet corner of Arlington National Cemetery and surrounded by Confederate war dead. The Cemetery’s carefully crafted signage sits along the most common approach.

*CAMP is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization whose members are interested in the identification, restoration, preservation, and memorialization of old military installations as well as their history and traditions. All persons sharing these interests are invited to join. CAMP publishes an academic journal (*The Journal of America’s Military Past*) and a newsletter on recent developments in historic preservation (*Headquarters Heliogram*), and holds an annual conference. Find out more at: www.campjump.org.*