

RICHMOND REPORT

By Brain Palmer

Before the George Floyd uprisings, Richmond’s Confederate monuments had seemed inviolable. On the rare occasions that someone burst their sacred bubble with a jagged, spray-painted tag, city or state officials would deploy cleaners to powerwash the graffiti away.

That protesters targeted those sites after Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis wasn’t surprising. But the magnitude of the assault was. With paint, hands, and—at the national headquarters of the United Daughters of the Confederacy—fire, people made their rage known.

Mob violence or citizen uprising? Defacement or refacement? Your answer may depend on what you know or don’t know about who erected the statues, why they put them there, and how they did it.

More likely, your view depends on how you identify yourself and what you believe.

Confederate sites and structures are not history in themselves, so removing them does not “erase history.” They do, however, tell us a lot about our past, if we care to look at them in context.

They help us understand how white citizens used intimidation, graft, and violence to claw back rights that Black citizens had

won for themselves in a gruesome civil war and during the brief period of possibility that followed. The monuments and their truth-bending inscriptions tell us a lot about how a monopoly on political power created white entitlement to public resources, some of which funded monument construction and most of which did not go to the needs of the Black community. The monuments tell us something about how a white majority maintained absolute authority through discriminatory law and either the threat or the actuality of violence. And Confederate sites and structures also help us understand the legacy of Jim Crow, that system of engineered advantage (for whites) and disadvantage (for Blacks and other POC) that's still embedded in our culture, law, and landscape.

Context. It's in the archives. It's in the newspapers of the time—the Black papers, such as the *Richmond Planet*—and in plenty of recent research, art, and oratory. It's in the persistence of residential segregation, the underfunding of Black communities, the wealth gap, the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and brown folk, the brutality of police.

We also see it in the neglect of historic Black cemeteries like East End and Evergreen here in Richmond and the political machinations that put such sacred places in unqualified yet favored hands.

Editors of our largest local newspaper, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, tell us that once the monuments are gone, we should “put the past behind us and focus on the present and the future.”¹ This is a stunningly retrograde statement in 2020, but it is perhaps not surprising for a paper that has consistently been on the trailing edge of history when it comes to Black folk. It is a call

for a retreat from reality, an invitation to ignore honest African American testimony about these toxic objects—from *Planet* editor John Mitchell Jr., a man born into slavery, who in 1890 opposed the first monument on the Avenue, to Black Lives Matter. It gives a green light to citizens, particularly whites, to retreat into denial because the message or the messenger—or both—offends their sensibilities. This is where the *Richmond Times Dispatch*'s guidance becomes especially dangerous to those of us who can't hide behind whiteness or wealth: as a segment of the citizenry returns to its delusion, that segment will try to use its power to drag the rest of us back into that delusion. Removing statues is only the beginning of a necessary reckoning with our past.

¹Pamela Stallsmith and Robin Beres, "Goodbye Confederate Statues,"
The Richmond Times Dispatch, July 21, 2020

Commonwealth is organized and curated by Beta-Local co-directors Pablo Guardiola, Michael Linares, and nibia pastrana santiago and former co-director Sofía Gallisá Muriente; ICA at VCU Chief Curator Stephanie Smith; Noah Simblist, Chair of Painting + Printmaking at VCUarts; and Kerry Bickford, Director of Programs, Nicole Pollard, Program Coordinator and Nato Thompson, Sueyun and Gene Locks Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary.

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