

THE **ANTI-RACIST**
PRESERVATIONIST'S GUIDE TO

Confederate Monuments

Their Past and a Future Without Them

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THE LOST CAUSE

After the South lost the Civil War in 1865, white Southerners began reframing and sanitizing the story of their bloody, failed battle to preserve slavery.

In the revisionist history that resulted, the defeated Confederacy's "lost cause" was declared to be just and heroic: a struggle to defend states' rights and save a romanticized Southern way of life. Slavery was stripped from the narrative, but white supremacy remained as a central prop for white Southern identity. A new, "acceptable" white supremacist ideology was born.

During the Reconstruction Era (1863/5-1877), the Lost Cause ideology grew into a movement whose proponents actively resisted political and economic equality for Black Americans. By 1870, the Ku Klux Klan operated in almost every Southern state, waging a campaign of terror and violence against Black leaders and their allies. After a string of conservative political victories in the 1870s, the Klan achieved its primary goal: White supremacy, undergirded by Lost Cause ideology, was established as the ruling order of the New South. The next step was to institutionalize it.

COLONIZING PUBLIC SPACE

In the final quarter of the 19th century, Jim Crow laws legalized segregation and the disenfranchisement of Black Americans in the South, and the Lost Cause was written into school textbooks, promoted in popular magazines, and adopted as the central tenet of Confederate memorial associations.

In the mid-1880s, with Black politicians from the Reconstruction Era out of power, these private groups began raising Confederate monuments at a feverish pace, colonizing public land with private memorials to the Lost Cause.

EARLY OPPOSITION

In the final quarter of the 19th century, Jim Crow laws legalized segregation and the disenfranchisement of Black Americans in the South, and the Lost Cause was written into history—and the built environment. Yet courageous black leaders did speak out, right from the start. In 1870, [Frederick] Douglass wrote:

"Monuments to the 'lost cause' will prove monuments of folly ... in the memories of a wicked rebellion which they must necessarily perpetuate ... It is a needless record of stupidity and wrong."

In her memoirs, Mamie Garvin Fields, a Black clubwoman from Charleston, South Carolina, describes the impact of one such monument in downtown Charleston:

"At the same time that [Frederick] Douglass was preaching against slavery, John C. Calhoun was preaching for it. ... Our white city fathers wanted to keep what [Calhoun] stood for alive. ... [T]hey put up a life-size figure of John C. Calhoun preaching ... Blacks took that statue personally. As you passed by, here was Calhoun looking you in the face and telling you, 'Nigger, you may not be a slave, but I am back to see you stay in your place.'"

Even Robert E. Lee, General of the Confederate Army, opposed Confederate monuments on the grounds of national reunification, but his voice should not be included in this discussion.

THE LOST CAUSE CONTINUES

In time, 1,000-plus Confederate memorials would be built, with spikes of activity from 1890-1920 and in the 1950s and 60s, just as Civil Rights leaders fought to secure long-delayed justice and equality for Black Americans.

Data on lynchings and monument-building reveal a correlation in their activity, clustered around Civil War anniversaries and gains in Civil Rights for Black Americans.

Confederate monuments built in the 20th century, even in our lifetimes, are instruments of white power, planned to pay homage to slave-owning society, assert dominance over Black Americans, and pass on Lost Cause ideology to future generations. Most were dedicated to “the sturdy white men of the South” who “maintained white supremacy and secured Caucasian civilization” on the battlefield, through the KKK’s postwar reign of terror, and during the Jim Crow Era that extended through the 1960s—and whose legacy lingers today in the form of systemic racism.

OPPOSITION TODAY

Karen Finney, the Black great-great-great grandniece of Robert E. Lee, sums up the case against Confederate monuments:

"It's simple: my ancestor was a slave owner who fought to preserve slavery. If his side had won, that system of enslavement would have included me as well. Supporters of the statues still want to persuade people they're not about white supremacy. It's time to bring the statues down."

Lee's white descendant, Robert W. Lee IV, also makes the case against Confederate monuments:

"... The broken, racist system we have built on the Lost Cause is far larger than a single statue, but the statue of my ancestor has stood for years in Richmond as an idol of this white supremacist mind-set. The statue is a hollow reminder of a painful ideology and acts of oppression against black people. Taking it down will provide new opportunities for conversations, relationships and policy change."

WHAT TO DO

Today, some (mostly, white) people worry that removing Confederate monuments from public spaces will lead to historical erasure, or the forgetting of the past, but such monuments do not tell our country's history.

They are the material culture of a racist ideology, costing taxpayers millions of dollars each year in upkeep and maintenance.

There is a better way:

- Display the monuments and memorials in museums* where they are interpreted in the context of Lost Cause ideology, the Jim Crow Era, white supremacy, and systemic racism
- Place monuments and memorials in private parks dedicated to telling the painful story of America's racist past
- Enter the monuments and memorials into permanent storage
- If a site is cleared, any planning for new monuments should be led by local communities and Black voices, with officials bearing in mind that Black voices are not monolithic and that many groups and perspectives should participate in the process, which is an opportunity for deep, uncomfortable, and healing reconciliatory work.
- Recontextualize monuments and memorials in situ (see the next page for more)

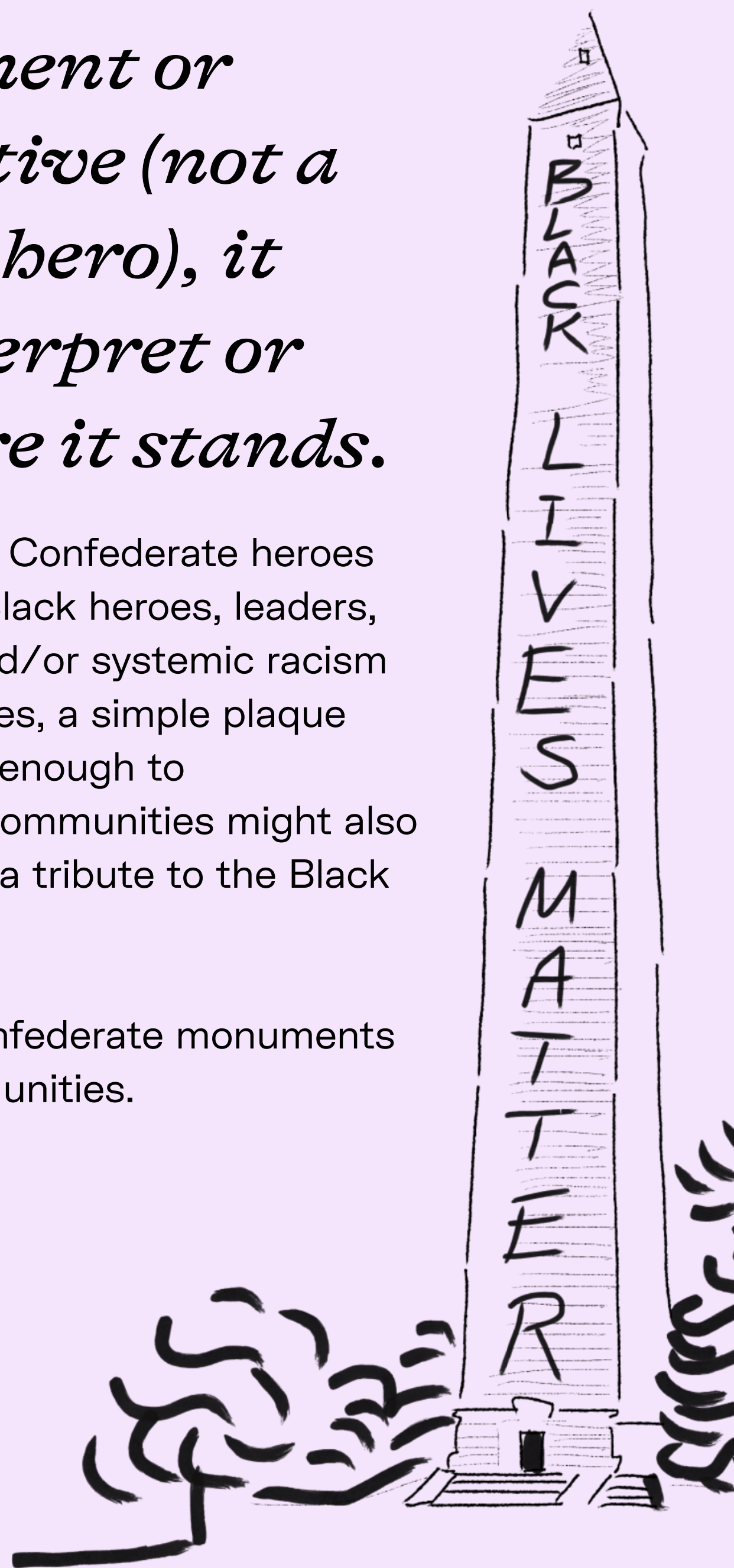
*Excluding Confederate heritage museums

WHAT TO DO

If a Confederate monument or memorial is non-figurative (not a statue of a Confederate hero), it may be possible to reinterpret or recontextualize it where it stands.

For example, an obelisk bearing the names of Confederate heroes could be covered instead with the names of Black heroes, leaders, and survivors of slavery, the Jim Crow Era, and/or systemic racism (as suggested by @adaesthete). In some cases, a simple plaque offering an honest account of history may be enough to recontextualize a non-figurative monument. Communities might also decide to leave tagged monuments in situ as a tribute to the Black Lives Matters movement.

Note: Decision-making around the fate of Confederate monuments should be led by Black voices and local communities.



NO SLIPPERY SLOPE

Some (mostly, white) people worry that the removal of Confederate monuments will lead to the destruction of historic houses such as Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington, and Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson, or even the White House, which was built by enslaved people.

This “slippery slope” argument is unfounded:

- Enslaved people built, labored in, and lived in America’s historic houses, from New England to the South to California. When interpreted through an anti-racist lens, historic buildings tell the stories of enslaved people and their descendants.
- Unlike monuments, architecture is mutable, and historic buildings tell stories from throughout their histories—from the time of their construction through the present. Anti-racist interpretive strategies can shed light on Black and Brown stories from throughout our country’s history.
- Sites such as Mount Vernon are at the forefront of research in the material culture of slavery. Their work is an important part of setting the record straight on American history.

A BETTER FUTURE

Confederate monuments are uniquely discrete objects, and they are mostly unique to the South*, but the built environment of slavery is diffuse and extends throughout the United States and Europe. Boston's Faneuil Hall, for example, was built with funds given by donor Peter Faneuil, a merchant engaged in the slave trade. No one proposes the destruction of Faneuil Hall, Lower Manhattan, Center City Philadelphia, London's St. James, or the stately homes of England because of their connection to slavery or the Triangle Trade. Instead, a diverse coalition of anti-racist historians and preservationists is excavating the Black and Brown stories embedded in these environments.

Thanks to their work, rather than forgetting history, we are finally coming to learn it.

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*A few examples can be found in other regions of the U.S.