

Richmond's black community divided on defaced Robert E. Lee statue

Posted At : November 25, 2020 3:19 PM | Posted By : SHSJC

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For nearly 130 years, Robert E. Lee sat upon his granite horse undefiled, gazing down Monument Avenue in Richmond from a height of 60 feet, holding the reins in his left hand, his sword behind his left leg, angering African Americans, a symbol of hatred and the long bitter failed fight to keep them enslaved.

Today, years of protests and graffiti that reach almost to the top of the pedestal just may have satisfied that anger, African American residents say.

"I prefer to see the statue up with the art because we took what was theirs and made it our own," said Evan Luck, a resident of Richmond for 21 years. "Many people congregate there to remember the innocent lives that were taken from us. It is sort of a sanctuary for us now, and I love how it has brought us together."

An iconic haven for Richmond's black residents, the graffiti and messaging reflected in hues of orange, yellow, black, and blue serve as a reminder to future generations that the current generation stood up and fought for justice, they say.

"I don't think the statue should be removed. All of the art represents our generation standing up, and it gives people after us a chance to see that we tried to fight for justice and just maybe it will be in history books one day," said Angela Beverly, a resident of Richmond for 21 years.

Still, others believe justice will not be truly served until the statue comes down.

"Robert E. Lee was a slave owner and a Confederate leader. This is not anything that we should be proud of or something that our city should praise," said Taya Robinson, a resident of Richmond for 21 years.

This summer was the first time Richmond has removed several Confederate monuments, but it is not the first time Richmond's black residents have protested the existence of Confederate symbolism in the capital.

After the 2015 killing of nine African Americans by a white supremacist in a church in South Carolina, black residents of Richmond protested that both the Confederate flag and monuments were representations of hatred and needed to be removed. Former governor, Terry McAulliffe, ordered the removal of the flag from the license plates of the Sons of Confederate Veterans but argued that the statues could remain because they were symbols of heritage, according to The Richmond Times Dispatch.

The protests against Confederate monuments have spread around the U.S. and globally, where black citizens have protested and defaced more than 20 statues, bringing about the removal of 38 monuments in the three months

after the killing of George Floyd, according to USA Today.

There are approximately 700 Confederate statues across the United States, most built during the Jim Crow Era. Early memorial statues were built to remember deceased soldiers, but later were erected to glorify leaders of the Confederacy and commemorate the cause of the Civil War, according to History.com.

Interestingly, some African American residents say their parents and grandparents either never pointed out the statues, or steered clear, so they never paid much attention to them until the protests started.

"Growing up in Richmond, the Confederate statues never bothered me because I just got used to seeing them on my way to school. After a while, I kind of just stopped paying attention to who they were and what they represented," said Alana Towns, a resident of Richmond for 21 years.

Still, Towns said she was glad to see them being removed.

"I was ecstatic. It gave me a huge sense of pride for Richmond," said Nakhi Finch, who has lived in Richmond for 11 years .

Statues of Jefferson Davis, Christopher Columbus, William Carter Wickham, Stonewall Jackson, Matthew Fontaine Maury, and J.E.B. Stuart have all been removed or vandalized, according to The New York Times.

Some residents say that simply removing these statues will not get rid of underlying-racism and race-related hatred and that real progress will not come until people learn to get along.

"I do not believe taking down Robert E. Lee's statue will ever change what's already in people's hearts," said Rachel Rhoades, a resident of Richmond for over 40 years. "Until people decide not to hate one another, decide to love each other and get along, just talk, and listen to one another, nothing is ever going to change."