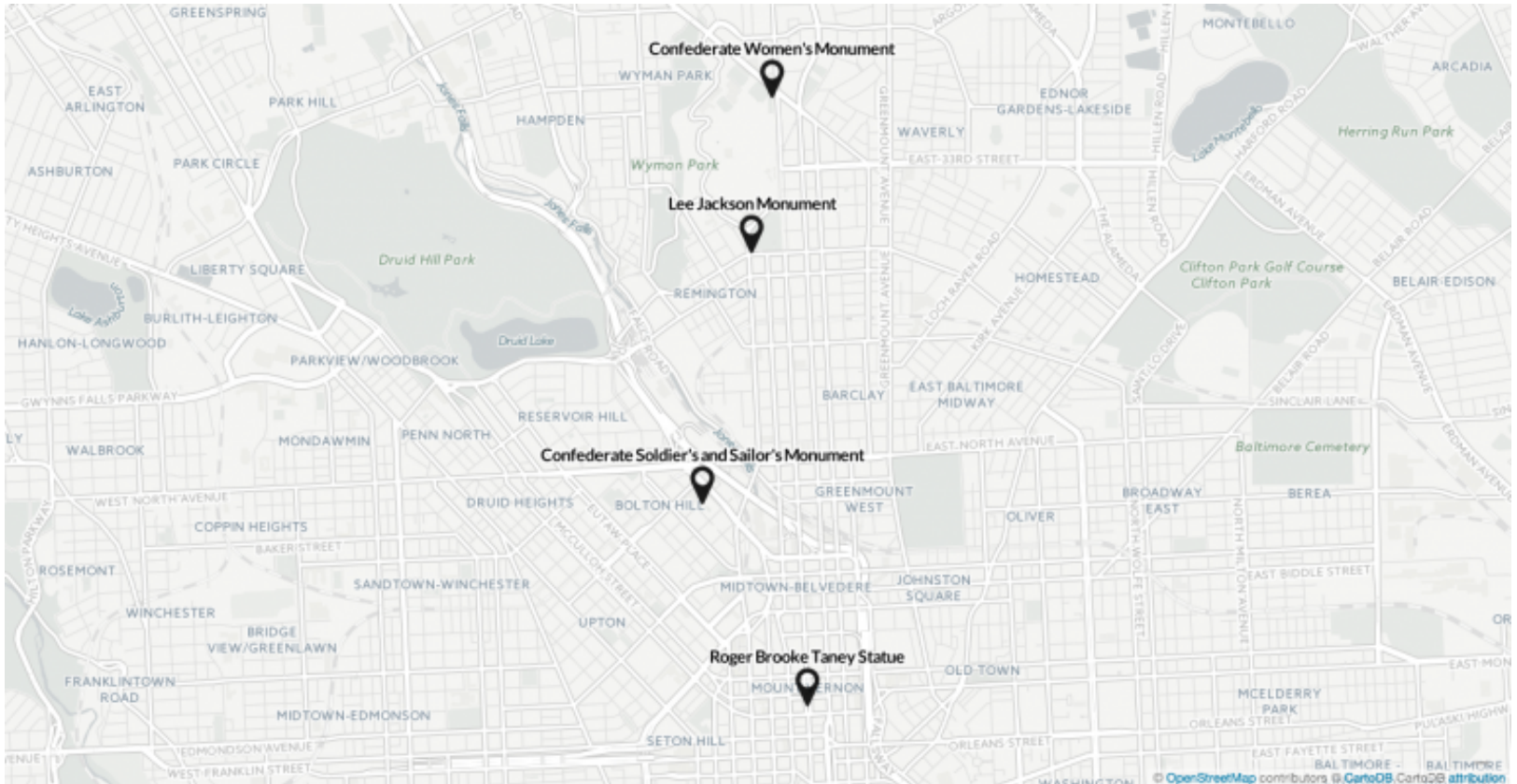


# The (Uncertain) Fate of Baltimore's Confederate Monuments

by November 14, 2016



Map showing the location of Baltimore's four public Confederate Civil War monuments. Base map data © OpenStreetMap; data presentation © CartoDB; courtesy Baltimore Heritage.

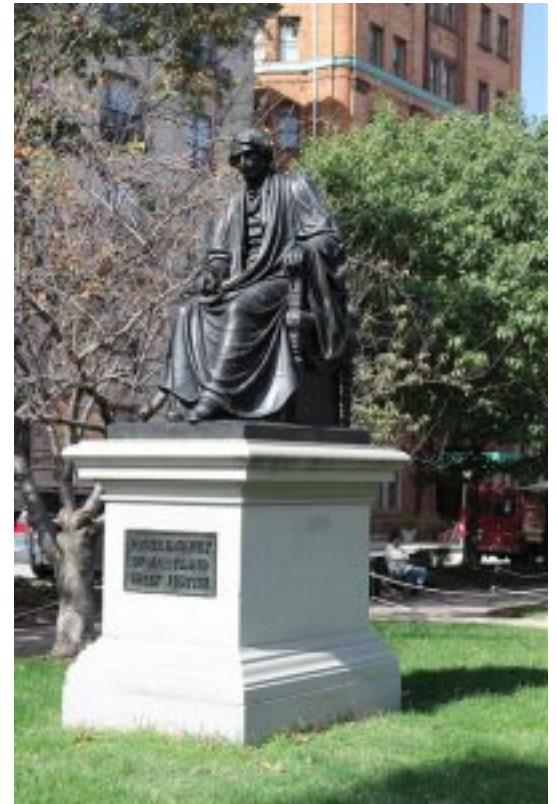
**By Elizabeth Nix**

This past January I, an avowed preservationist, made the motion to remove a 129-year-old statue from Baltimore's prominent Mount Vernon Square. As a member of the Baltimore City Mayor's Special Commission to Review Baltimore's Public Confederate Monuments, I encouraged my fellow commissioners to support a recommendation to deaccession the Roger Brooke Taney statue, erected in 1887 to honor the Maryland native who as Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court wrote the Dred Scott decision, which in 1857 denied African Americans with slave ancestors the right to citizenship

and the U.S. government the right to regulate slavery in the western territories. The motion carried, along with another I supported to deaccession a twin equestrian statue of Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, erected in 1948 and located about two miles north of the Taney statue.

Baltimore formed this special commission in the wake of the June 2015 shootings at Emanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina, in which nine people were killed and the state’s subsequent decision to remove the Confederate battle flag from its statehouse grounds. It also followed the outbreak of civil unrest and subsequent public criticism of Baltimore’s long history of systemic injustice for African Americans following the death of Freddie Gray, a black man, while in police custody in April 2015. Like many other cities in the summer of 2015, Baltimore took inventory of its monuments and identified four as memorializing the Confederacy—in addition to Taney and Lee and Jackson, the city owns the Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monument

(1902) and the Confederate Women’s Monument (1915-1917), both gifts to the city from the Maryland Division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) with some funding help from the Maryland legislature. The Taney statue, a recast of a monument in on the grounds of the Maryland Statehouse in Annapolis, and the Lee and Jackson monument, which memorializes the final parting of the two generals at the Battle of Chancellorsville, Virginia, had both been funded by private individuals. Symptomatic of the depth of local feeling about the symbolism of these monuments, in July 2015 the Soldiers and Sailors Monument was tagged with “Black Lives Matter.”



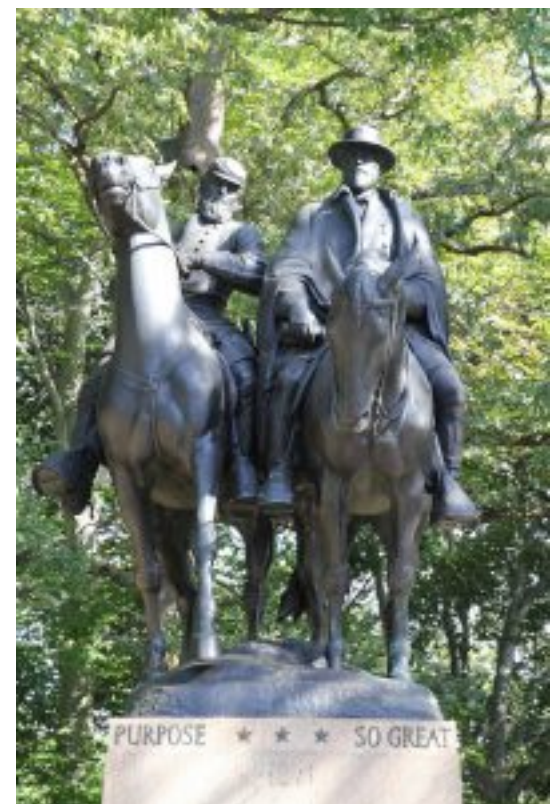
Roger Brooke Taney Monument, Mount Vernon Square, Baltimore, 2015. Photograph by C. Ryan Patterson; courtesy Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts.



Perhaps surprisingly, Baltimore is home to more monuments to the Confederacy than to the Union. Maryland, a slave-holding state, had not seceded during the Civil War, but Baltimore had seen the first casualties of the conflict when civilians attacked Union troops as they were changing trains on their way to the front. After Baltimore's mayor ordered two railroad bridges to be blown up in an attempt to prevent more federal troops from moving through the city, Union forces threw him and other government officials in jail and occupied the city for the remainder of the war. Baltimore remained divided in its loyalties even after the war ended. Since Maryland did not undergo Reconstruction, many former Confederates flocked to the state, and some members of General Lee's staff settled in Bolton Hill, the neighborhood where the Confederate Soldiers and Sailors monument stands.

Learning this history was part of the educational process I and six other commissioners embarked upon during our deliberations. As a professor of history specializing in Baltimore and a member of the city's Commission on Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP), I had been appointed to the review commission by Baltimore mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, along with two of my fellow CHAP commissioners. She also appointed three members of Baltimore's Public Art Commission (PAC) and selected Aaron Bryant, a member of CHAP and a curator at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, as our chair.

In her charge, the mayor asked us to recommend one of four options for each of the statues: (1) preservation, (2) new signage, (3) relocation, and (4) removal. She told us not to consider cost in our decisions. The makeup of the commission combined with our charge presented a challenge: both the Public Art Commission and CHAP have



Lee/Jackson Monument, Wyman Park, Baltimore, 2015.  
Photograph by C. Ryan Patterson; courtesy Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts.

missions to add or preserve, not to subtract or destroy. So the mayor invited us as commissioners to entertain options not usually encouraged by the missions of our other affiliations.

From the beginning, we elected to make our process completely transparent. We publicly announced the dates of our meetings , and we always held them in front of the public, including members of the press, who reported on our activities. Commissioners did not engage in meetings behind the scenes. We greatly benefitted from the energy and expertise of the staffs of CHAP and PAC who conducted research on the history of Baltimore's monuments and actions taken by other localities dealing with their Confederate statues. Staff made presentations, handled meeting logistics, and maintained a [website](#) created specifically for the special commission that included background information and a place where members of the public could register their views about the disposition of the monuments. We also benefitted from a [detailed contextual history of the monuments](#) prepared by Baltimore Heritage, a local nonprofit preservation organization. To alert people who walked by the monuments without necessarily identifying them as Confederate or knowing about the commission, staff posted signs at each site inviting the public to add their opinion to the website and attend our public hearings.

In our three meetings during the fall of 2015 we heard background information about the monuments from staff and Baltimore Heritage. Historian James Loewen, at the invitation of a member of the public, testified about the ideology of the Lost Cause, which promoted a pro-Confederate interpretation of the war, romanticized slavery, and informed the efforts of the UDC to erect monuments around the country at the turn of the twentieth century. Finally we hosted a three-hour public comment session at our December meeting where dozens of people spoke for three minutes each. Testimony was wide ranging, reflecting varying views about history itself: some argued for retaining the monuments as is, that to do otherwise would “erase history”; others for reinterpreting the monuments as a way to teach

about the past; yet others for removing them out of respect for victims of slavery and as offensive to contemporary sensibilities. Testimony also became emotional, suggesting how deeply the past can resonate in the present. One woman expressed anger that her Baltimore ancestor had been imprisoned during the war simply because he was a member of the mayor's staff.

Representatives of the Sons of the Confederacy came from out of state to assert that the monuments should remain in place. A thirteen-year-old girl who lives across from the Lee and Jackson statue told us about her distress every January during the Martin Luther King holiday weekend when Sons of the Confederacy surround the monument to celebrate Lee-Jackson Day, which precedes the King holiday weekend by a day.



Elizabeth Nix talking with University of Baltimore students about the Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monument. Photography by Audrey Hayes; courtesy Elizabeth Nix.

Our final meeting in January offered the commissioners the first chance to discuss their recommendations among themselves. Knowing that the Lee and Jackson statue depicted the generals conferring before the Battle of Chancellorsville, Commissioner Larry Gibson, a professor at University of Maryland School of Law and a CHAP commissioner, contacted the National Park Service at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park in Virginia, which interprets that battle among others. He discovered that the park has only a small obelisk in the glen where Lee and Jackson met before Jackson entered the fight where he would be mortally wounded by friendly fire. Park officials said they would be

delighted to acquire Baltimore's double equestrian statue. During the hearing, Commissioner Gibson argued that the statue would be more appropriately sited at the place where the encounter actually took place instead of Baltimore, where the two generals never met.



Professor Gibson's suggestion to move the statue to Chancellorsville forced the commission to juxtapose two eras of history and determine which was more appropriate to interpret in the twenty-first century. Was it more important to leave the statue in Baltimore, emphasizing the history of one wealthy donor who gave the monument to the city in the twentieth century and of a government official who accepted it, an action that demonstrated the hold the Lost Cause had over certain Baltimoreans well into the twentieth century? Or was it more important that this statue contribute to Civil War history by moving it to the site of the event it depicted? The commission voted 4 to 2 (the chair did not vote) to deaccession the statue with the recommendation that the City of Baltimore donate it to the National Park Service and place an interpretive marker at the Baltimore site, reminding Baltimoreans that it had once stood prominently in their city. Elford Jackson and Elissa Blount-Moorhead, the two commissioners who voted against the motion and both PAC representatives, wanted to keep the statue in Baltimore with contextualization, partly in recognition of its artistic merit.

After that decision, the commission voted 4-2 to deaccession the Taney statue (I sided with the majority) and 5-1 to keep the Soldiers and Sailors and the Women of the Confederacy monuments in place, with contextualization. Donna Cypress, the commissioner who cast the opposing vote in both of these cases and a CHAP member, wanted to deaccession these statues as well.

The recommendation to add contextualization to the two remaining statues opens the door for many creative solutions. The Confederate Women's Monument stands near a busy intersection across from Johns Hopkins University's Homewood campus, and the Soldiers and Sailors is on a more quiet terrace across from the Maryland Institute College of Art. The commission noted that these locations provide the opportunity for collaboration with the two schools to create provocative installations that will call attention to the Lost Cause movement and Baltimore's divided opinions over many decades, opinions which, as this special commission discovered in hundreds of public comments, still exist today.

Of course, these are only recommendations. In September the commission presented its [final report](#) to Mayor Rawlings-Blake who—despite the fact that the commission was told not to think about cost—[responded](#) that the expense of removing the Lee and Jackson and Taney monuments precludes any immediate action by the city. In the absence of external support for removal, she suggested that, at least for the immediate future, all four monuments be interpreted in situ “for today’s context,” a decision that has troubled some members of the commission. Still, whatever the ultimate outcome, the process served a valuable purpose for Baltimore. It illuminated the histories of four statues that previously had not, as Commissioner Blount-Moorhead stated, been “activated” by most Baltimoreans for decades. It created a forum for important commentary about the ways that the memory of slavery and the Civil War is currently used in our city. It raised questions about the function of public art and the civic interpretation of history. And it demonstrated that especially when members can contribute to the decision-making process, the public is more than willing to wrestle with the question of the role of the humanities in civic life, even if they don’t necessarily agree.



Confederate Women's Monument, Bishop's Park, Charles Street and University Parkway, Baltimore, 2015. Photography by C. Ryan Patterson; courtesy Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts.

Elizabeth Nix is associate professor of history at the University of Baltimore and a member of the Baltimore City Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation. She co-directed the university's Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth initiative, a multifaceted project commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the civil disturbances that broke out in the city following Martin Luther King's assassination; and co-edited a book of the same name that brought together several articles stemming from the project.