

# Contested Monuments, A Critical Issue in Times of Turmoil: A Report from the 2021 College of Fellows Roundtable

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## Introduction

Sharon C. Park

Expert panelists discuss the impacts of contested monuments from their professional viewpoints of federal policy, cultural conservation, community preservation, and social-justice advocacy.

**T**HE DEBATE ON PROBLEMATIC MONUMENTS is not new but has again come into focus due to recent cultural paradigm shifts brought about by the Black Lives Matter movement and the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. On October 27, 2021, at the APT virtual conference in Washington, D.C., the APT College of Fellows held a roundtable to address “Monument(al) Problems.” Monuments, in and of themselves, are not history, but they are physical representations of political, cultural, and power structures of their era. They are meant to send a message, and they can become lightning rods for the discussion of bigger issues. In many cases, these monuments, which were once thought symbolic of accepted norms, have become full of negative connotations and are disrespectful to entire communities. In the United States and elsewhere, solutions to the problem of contested monuments have run the gamut from destruction and erasure to relocation and reinterpretation. At the 2021 roundtable discussion, five professionals in the preservation movement examined differing approaches as communities are re-evaluating how to deal with public art, statuary, and racial/hate-based graffiti. The debate is not limited just to Black-related issues, but to all ethnic groups, including Indigenous people, who feel their history is not appropriately represented.



Fig. 1. Thomas Ball, *Emancipation Memorial*, Lincoln Park, Washington, D.C., erected 1876. This bronze statue, owned by the U.S. National Park Service, depicts President Abraham Lincoln holding a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation and standing next to a crouching, recently freed slave. There is a public movement to remove the statue, but its future is unclear. Photograph by Sharon Park, 2022.

Even when contested sculptures remain in public view, it is difficult to know exactly how best to respond to divergent voices. For example, the *Emancipation Memorial*, in Lincoln Park, in Washington, D.C., sometimes called the *Freedmen's Memorial*, was paid for by the wages of freed slaves and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places (Fig. 1). It was designed by Thomas Ball and erected in 1876. It has sparked conversation in Washington as part of the Black Lives Matter movement and the riots after the murder of George Floyd. A duplicate statue was fabricated and located in Boston, Massachusetts, Ball's hometown. After the riots in May 2020, Boston removed its copy of the *Emancipation Memorial* in July 2020, but the outcome of discussions with the

U.S. National Park Service about the future of the Lincoln Park statue remains unresolved.

Even at the time the memorial was dedicated in 1876, the noted orator and abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote to the *Republican* newspaper that he was uncomfortable with the statue: "I want to see before I die . . . a monument representing the negro, not couchant on his knees like a four-footed animal, but erect on his feet like a man." Many others are still waiting for monuments of respect.

The training of preservationists to be sources of protection and preservation of cultural artifacts is hard to reconcile in the face of so much public destruction of contested monuments. And yet the issue is not new: It dates back to the beginning of civilization, where conflicts of cultural erasure were evident, be they for religious, social, or economic reasons or just for survival. But in today's context, the roundtable's five speakers brought together thoughtful discussion about mediation, advocacy, and creative solutions and illustrated their professional expertise within their own preservation disciplines. As with any controversial topic, there were differing approaches to accepting or not accepting destructive actions.

As you will see in the following summaries, the destruction of artifacts should not be to erase history but to be a catalyst to understand its breadth and its impacts on diverse communities. A conservator tells how to address or modify artifacts in an additive way; a policy maker discusses collaborative protocols for engaging diverse stakeholders; a tribal liaison talks about the missing or misrepresented histories of Indigenous groups and the need to listen to a wider variety of voices; a community preservationist discusses how a community can rebound with new approaches to urban planning and public art; and an executive director presents the importance of telling a broad history of Black communities to engage all Americans in the complex and diverse heritage of the U.S.

The conversation moving forward is not about how to deal with destruction but how to be thoughtful and be part of a solution that presents history in all its complexity. As preservationists, we each, individually, have a responsibility to be more inclusive and proactive in finding solutions.

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## Historical Perspectives on Iconoclasm and the Removal of Contested Monuments

Rosa Lowinger

The last few years have seen a strong and steady movement to remove, repurpose, and destroy monuments and other works of art that glorify offensive ideologies and individuals who participated in the genocide of communities of color. Actions taken on behalf of this movement include the toppling of statues, wholesale removal of works of art, graffiti, and tagging that disrupts current narratives and poses alternatives to those that were codified in the past. As preservationists, we typically eschew unauthorized—and especially, violent—damage to art and monuments. Yet such actions—whether spontaneous or premeditated—are time-honored historical approaches, seen across centuries and continents.

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines vandalism as both an “action involving deliberate destruction of or damage to public or private property” and as “a deliberate, unauthorized act that is intentional and done in order to alter, make a mark in, or purposely damage art, architecture, or public places.” The history of monuments and architecture is intricately enmeshed with both of these definitions. From the toppling of statues of Stalin and Saddam Hussein to the graffiti from 1528 on the murals in the Hall of Perspectives in Rome’s Villa Farnesina that commemorate the sacking of Rome, unauthorized interventions into works of art and monuments can teach us stories we would otherwise not know. Sometimes, as in the case of the penciled-in words on the buildings of the Japanese American internment camp at Tule Lake, California, the evidence of those acts becomes more important than the artworks themselves (Fig. 2).

Unauthorized actions to repurpose monuments are of two basic types: those that add to a monument and those that

remove material. In the former category are graffiti and tagging, as seen at Subiaco, Italy; repainting; and all manner of wrapping, boxing, and covering (Fig. 3). These can be altered or removed in the future, and they use the monument itself as the basis for the intervention. The second category involves removing material by gouging, exploding,

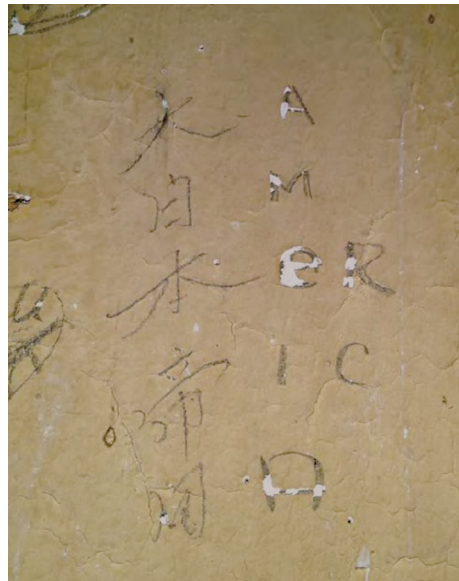


Fig. 2. Tule Lake War Relocation Center, Tule Lake, California, built 1943, showing a detail of the historic graffiti. This and other examples are being preserved as part of the history of the site. Photograph by Rosa Lowinger, 2014.

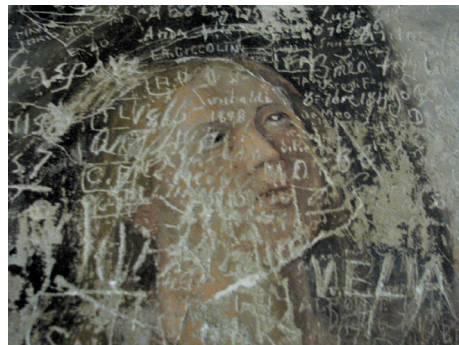


Fig. 3. Monastery of Saint Benedict, Subiaco, Italy, built ca. 1100, showing a detail of historic graffiti on the face of a mural. Photograph by Rosa Lowinger, 2009.

toppling, or otherwise using destructive methods to permanently alter the monument. While typically associated with acts of aggression—like the bombing of Palmyra and the Bamiyan



Fig. 4. Joiiri Minaya, *Proposal for Artistic Intervention on the Columbus Statue in Front of the Government House in Nassau, The Bahamas*, 2017, postcard, National Art Gallery of the Bahamas. Courtesy of Joiiri Minaya. Artist Joiiri Minaya was invited to create an exhibition at the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas, set to open on October 12, 2017. Considering the date, celebrated as the day Christopher Columbus “discovered America,” she proposed to wrap the Columbus statue in front of the Governor’s House in Nassau with tropical-print spandex fabric as a temporary installation. The museum reached out to the Antiquities Monuments & Museum Corporation (AMMC), but AMMC stated that it was “unable to support my artistic intervention” because they had found that “there had not been a national conversation on the matter.” Minaya decided instead to make postcards showing a montage of the proposed installation and then invited the Bahamian audience to write their thoughts about her proposal on the back of the postcards, to start the “national conversation.”

Buddhas by Islamicists or the leveling of Cambodia's Buddhist temples and libraries by the Khmer Rouge during its atrocious 1975 "Return to Year Zero" campaign—these actions can also be hallmarks of welcome political change.

How we remove works also matters. Mob topplings of sculptures reflect the anger of the times. However, ritualistic removals of works that celebrate racist figures provide augmented opportunities for reflection and education. This is especially true when dealing with works that require more contextualization than Confederate monuments, which are uniquely heinous and whose destruction is easy to justify.

The current climate for reimagining sites and monuments also offers special opportunities to artists who have devised clever alternatives to the subjugating narratives. These continually evolving methods range from covering with graffiti and adding explanatory signage to allowing the monuments to be enveloped in new materials and using the sites of removed monuments as performance spaces (Fig. 4). The goal of these processes is to create new opportunities for understanding and reflection of historical positions that are now being challenged and reimagined.

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## Federal Guidance on Contested Monuments

**Beth L. Savage**

The U.S. General Services Administration's (GSA) Center for Historic Buildings disseminated *Guidance on Site-Specific Art, Commemorative Objects, and Architectural Features In or On GSA Historic Property* in August 2020. The guidance amplifies the agency's well-established historic-preservation policy and emerged in response to a series of current events and the ongoing social discourse about the meaning, interpretation, and treatment of cultural assets reflecting contested history. The recent conversations have been both within the GSA cohort and with representatives from our client-tenant agencies, external partners, municipalities, and concerned citizens. Although not a new issue to contend with, the dialogue had reached an intensity deserving heightened attention to and consideration of established policy, regulation, and law governing GSA's stewardship responsibilities for historic cultural assets. The guidance is intended primarily to help GSA senior management and facilities managers execute effective and appropriate protective and response measures within varied local circumstances that minimize harm to historic materials and features and to reinforce the leadership role of GSA's preservation professionals in doing so.

This guidance defines GSA's stewardship responsibilities under provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act, federal regulation, *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*, and the GSA policy ADM 1020.3 *Procedures for Historic Properties*. The guidance addresses issues that may arise within evolving social viewpoints regarding historic artwork, commemorative objects, and architectural features and decorative arts not included in the Fine Arts inventory, in or on GSA historic properties. The historic building inventory is currently comprised of 514 courthouses, customs houses, office buildings, border stations,

and various other federal building types constructed between 1810 and 1979 in communities large and small across the country.

Case studies presented in the guidance illustrated meaningful, inclusive public consultation processes involving two GSA historic courthouses. One highlighted the preservation, overpainting, and interpretation of a decorative finish



**Fig. 5.** Birch Bayh Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse, Indianapolis, Indiana, built 1905, showing artist and conservator Mary Yeager surveying her work in a highly decorative courtroom, which featured the names of some Supreme Court justices. She had previously conserved the murals in 2000 and returned recently to execute the final consensus solution achieved in the inclusive public Section 106 consultation with stakeholders. She replaced the name Taney with Marshall in a reversible manner with conservation varnish and acrylic paint. Together with an interpretive display, this collectively meaningful solution balanced preservation goals with contemporary community values. Courtesy of the U.S. District Court, Southern District of Indiana, 2019.

Fig. 6. Natchez Courthouse, Natchez, Mississippi, built in 1853 as the Natchez Institute School, showing the installation of the new informational plaques, rededicated in 2011. Courtesy of the U.S. General Services Administration, 2011.



with hurtful connotations of injustice in a historic courtroom in Indianapolis, Indiana (Fig. 5). The other featured the installation of newly cast World War I commemorative plaques that now tell the full story of all local veterans in Natchez, Mississippi (Fig. 6).

The Center for Historic Buildings developed this guidance in close collaboration with the Fine Arts program and with the regional historic preservation officers and historic preservation specialists; they have been critical voices in its development as they are key to implementing it throughout the country with support from the Center for Historic Buildings. In contemplating ways to effectively address evolving views on the content of commemorative historic features, we must proceed thoughtfully, inclusively, and deliberately in order

to build consensus for resolutions that strike a measured balance of historic-preservation goals and that are reflective of contemporary community values.

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## Erasing the Culture of Native Peoples

Theresa Pasqual

There is a 12,000-year history of Native populations in North America settling on sacred lands. Around the year 1100, there is evidence of migration, and by the sixteenth century, Spanish influence began to have serious consequences in erasing the culture of Native peoples. Spanish conquests brought European values to areas in our Southwest region, resulting in enslavement, colonization, and forced religious conversions to Christianity.

In 1598 in Nuevo Mexico, Spanish troops in the Acoma pueblos began a series of killings of more than 800 Natives, which included such harsh punishments as cutting off a foot of each of the adult Natives and 20 years of servitude. Children were forcibly sent to Catholic schools to be converted to Catholicism. During this period of harsh treatment, almost 100 years of traditional Native practices had to go underground. The 1680 Pueblo Revolt was a stand that the Natives took to reestablish their independence. These atrocities continued into the nineteenth century, and even with statehood in 1912 for New Mexico, the horrors could not be erased from the culture.

And so it is no surprise that the multiple voices of Native groups argue that there should be a reexamination of those versions of history that tell only the side of the Spanish troops. In many areas, the history of the Native peoples has been erased.

The bronze statue of Spanish conquistador Juan de Oñate in Alcade, New Mexico, which was erected in 1994 as part of the celebration to mark the 400th anniversary of Oñate's arrival into New Mexico, was torn down in 2020. Many Pueblo people felt the controversial statue did not take into account the brutality inflicted upon Pueblo peoples under Oñate's period of rule. Although some New Mexicans claim lineage to Spain, this narrative erases communities that

identify as Genizario, those descended from captive Indian slaves mixed with Hispanic lineage who formed non-tribal villages assimilated into New Mexican society.

In another example, the *Soldiers' Monument* in Santa Fe, New Mexico, was erected between 1867 and 1868 to honor federal soldiers in battles fought in New Mexico, including those who died “in various battles with savage Indians” (Fig. 7). It was torn down in 2020. The word “savage” was hastily chiseled off the monument in 1974 by unknown person(s), though the term remained in the collective memory of Native peoples, including the past treatment of Native people during the 1800s and the systemic foundations that disproportionately affect Pueblos and other tribes today.

San Esteban del Rey Mission Church in Acoma Pueblo, New Mexico, constructed in 1629 by Fray Juan Ramirez as part of the forced conversion of Native people to Catholicism, tells only one side of the history. Mission structures were often placed atop traditional religious sites to underscore the Catholic belief in one god, and the imagery and symbolism used were meant to convey Catholic ideology and the consequences if one did not convert. Although much of the traditional religious practice was forced underground in order to survive, the present-day mission churches con-

tinue to be cared for by Pueblo communities, which recognize these places in the difficult and traumatic history while co-existing with traditions and practices of the ancestors.

Healing occurs at the intersection of time, truth, empathy, and active discourse of what may be difficult and hurtful topics. One must speak to the past and find places where light can be shone, to collectively see who the Native peoples truly are.

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Fig. 7. *Soldiers' Monument*, Santa Fe, New Mexico, erected 1867–1868. The monument is controversial as a symbol of conquest and disrespect to the Indigenous peoples of New Mexico. The words “savage Indians” had been a lightning rod to the local Native community for over 50 years. The obelisk at the center of the monument was toppled on October 12, 2020. Photograph by Luis Sanchez Saturno, 2020. Copyright © 2020 The New Mexican, Inc. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.



## Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia

Bryan Clark Green

We often approach monuments as though they are permanent, but perhaps monuments are best thought of as political speech. That speech need not be perpetuated forever.

Scholarly consensus has revealed that the original intent of monuments to the Confederacy was to reinforce racist ideals. They are not so much objects of public art as proclamations of white supremacy rendered in granite and bronze, their meaning clearly understood, both by those who erected them and by members of the Black community to whom their exclusionary message was directed. Their presence is a reminder of a racist societal structure that led to a nation divided against itself, followed by an era of Reconstruction that began with the promise of equality but soon retreated to race-based social and economic disparity.

The *Robert E. Lee Monument* (1890), on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia, is perhaps the best-known monument of this period, but hundreds more reinforce this message of bigotry and inequality all across the South. The Lee monument in Richmond might also be the one most impacted by the spontaneous graffiti of protesters (Fig. 8). Members of the community transformed its site into Marcus-David Peters Circle, named for a young Black teacher killed by police in Richmond while he was in the midst of a mental-health crisis. With the removal of the last stone from the contested monument’s base, the space that once announced racial division became the public square of Richmond’s multicultural dreams (Fig. 9). This and other reinterpretations were only temporary, however: Between 2020 and 2021, with one exception, all Confederate monuments in the city of Richmond were removed, as were many other monuments across Virginia.

Some may ask: In lieu of counter-interpretation, why not just add additional monuments? Such a vast



Fig. 8. Antonin Mercié, *Robert E. Lee Monument*, Lee Circle/Marcus-David Peters Circle, Monument Avenue, Richmond, Virginia, erected 1890, showing an evening projection of the image of Frederick Douglass onto the monument. Photograph by Bryan Clark Green, 2020.



Fig. 9. *Robert E. Lee Monument*, showing the removal of stone bearing graffiti from the base. Photograph by Bryan Clark Green, 2021.



Fig. 10. Thomas Jay Warren, *Emancipation and Freedom Monument*, Brown's Island, Richmond, Virginia, erected 2021. Photograph by Bryan Clark Green, 2021.

undertaking requires a new view of monuments, both those that remain and the new ones to be installed. For example, Kehinde Wiley’s *Rumors of War* (2019), located on the grounds of what was a Confederate camp in Richmond (now the site of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts), brilliantly upended and commented upon the nearby Stonewall Jackson monument. Likewise, Thomas Jay Warren’s *Emancipation and Freedom Monument* (2021), also in Richmond, addresses the moment when shackles are removed but confirms that scars remain (Fig. 10). Perhaps that is the best metaphor for the issue before us. We can remove monuments that once supported a racist agenda and design new ones that tell a fuller story, but the scars remain and tell a story, too, of hope subverted and dreams denied. It is only by forthrightly facing those scars on the body politic can we hope to create monuments that look like all of us, not just some of us.

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## African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund

**Brent Leggs**

Preservation as social justice is a tool to combat controversial monuments that fail to tell the full and accurate story of American history. Combating half-truths, the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund (the Fund) leverages the power of place as a force for enacting positive social change and for telling the full history of the U.S. Historically, events that discriminated



Fig. 11. African Meeting House, Nantucket, Massachusetts, built 1827, showing vandalism with racist graffiti. The meeting house is a National Historic Landmark and was constructed and occupied by Black people in the nineteenth century. It has been used as a meeting house, school, and church by the Black community. Photograph by Jen Cohen, 2018.



Fig. 12. Decatur House, Lafayette Square, Washington, D.C., built 1818–1819, with slave quarters added in 1821–1822, showing tagging as part of demonstrations in front of the White House to impress the lack of response to the Black Lives Matter movement. The house is a National Historic Landmark, owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Photograph by Katherine Malone-France, 2020.

against individuals and communities through devastating urban-renewal actions have destroyed established Black communities. Along with redlining and disinvestment, these systemic challenges have played a role in the significant loss of both financial and cultural capital. Racism is an American social disease with psychological, emotional, economic, educational, and health issues plaguing citizens of color, and its impact on historic built environments and the recording of our national history remains visible across the country.

Reflecting on monuments of oppressors is only part of the conversation. In recent times, historic Black sites, such as the African Meeting House in Nantucket, Massachusetts, and the Mother Emanuel



church in Charlotte, South Carolina, are places that had experienced racially motivated vandalism and violence in just the past six years (Fig. 11). The Fund works against cultural inequity and the blatant disregard for Black heritage and people through positive action to restore sites, cultural landscapes, and public memory that broaden our nation’s understanding of the Black experience. Through historic preservation, we seek to answer questions like this one. A stirring graffiti quote written in May 2020 on the Decatur House in Washington, D.C., a site of enslavement, reads: “Why do we have to keep telling you Black Lives Matter?” (Fig. 12). The Fund believes that not until Black history matters will our society value and revere Black humanity.

We are witnessing a new generation of preservationists reshaping the American landscape by shedding light on a diverse

set of social and ethnic issues. From the presidential home of James Madison, where descendants of Madison’s enslaved community are advocating for shared authority and governance, to the Vernon A.M.E. church destroyed during the Tulsa Race Riots of 1921, whose story is inspiration for healing and reconciliation, to Olivewood Cemetery in Houston, which suffered from environmental-injustice impacts from adjacent development projects, the Fund fights with and on behalf of Black communities countering inequity and injustice. The long period of erasing stories and neglecting Black cultural sites must be corrected. It is time for accurate identities and equitable representation of Black history and landmarks in the U.S.

**Brent Leggs** is the executive director of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund and senior vice president of the National Trust for Historic Pres-

ervation. Envisioned as a social movement for justice, equity, and reconciliation, the Fund is promoting the role of cultural preservation in telling the nation’s full history and encouraging civic leaders and other to advocate on behalf of Black historic places. He can be reached at [bleggs@savingplaces.org](mailto:bleggs@savingplaces.org).



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