

// COMMUNITY

# CONFRONTING THE CONFEDERACY, AGAIN. AND AGAIN.



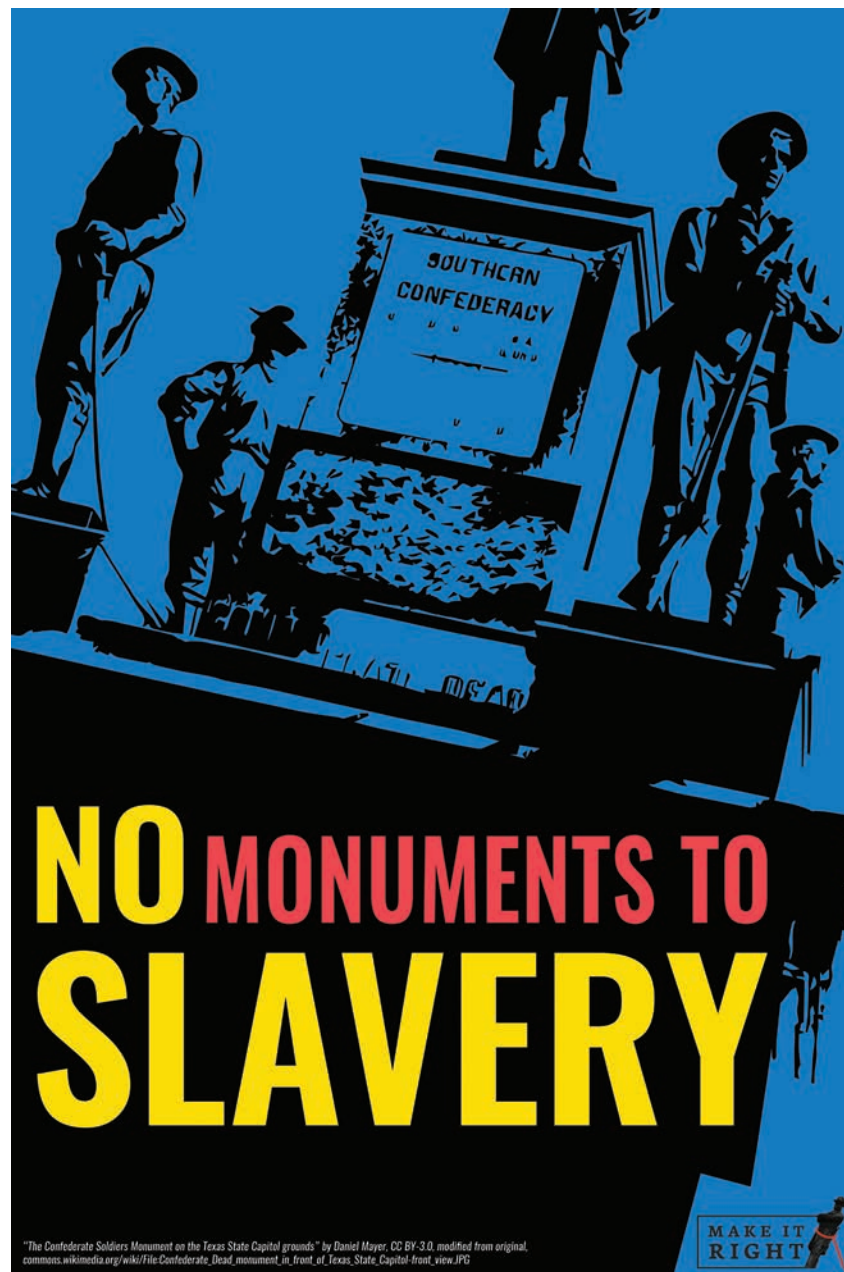
OVER A YEAR AGO, four local women contacted the Jefferson County Commission to request the removal of a plaque by the front door of the Jefferson County Courthouse honoring Confederate soldiers. Placed by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1986 to commemorate their ancestors, the plaque reads: *1861-1865 In honor and memory of the Confederate soldiers of Jefferson County, who served in the War Between the States. Erected by the Leetown Chapter #231 United Daughters of the Confederacy. Erected May 25, 1986.*

Though the Leetown Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy has since dissolved, surviving member Polly Wharton has stated she is in favor of removing the plaque, as the original intention was to honor, not offend, and if taking down the plaque would end the controversy, then she is supportive. Regardless, the plaque remains, and the debate continues.

To that end, the courthouse plaque is not the only marker under scrutiny in Jefferson County. The Heyward Shepherd Memorial in Harpers Ferry is on the list of ten targeted monuments of the Make it Right Project ([www.independentmediainstitute.org/make-it-right](http://www.independentmediainstitute.org/make-it-right))—a group "committed to taking down Confederate monuments and addressing American historical truths." Kali Holloway, the project's senior director, said the project isn't about starting a national dialogue or raising awareness. Instead, Holloway wants to see an end outcome; she wants to make visible, measurable change.

"I don't want to keep talking ad nauseam about these ideas—making it seem like a lost cause," Holloway emphasized. "We need to get beyond just talking. Part of the visible change involves the installation of billboards that address the need to remove monuments—so far, one in Chapel Hill (NC) and one in Charlottesville (VA).

Located in Harpers Ferry (WV), the Heyward Shepherd Memorial is considered by the Make It Right Project to be a "loyal slave monument"—one which was "erected to propagate the fallacious idea that black men



"The Confederate Soldiers Monument on the Texas State Capitol grounds" by Daniel Mayer, CC BY 3.0, modified from original, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Confederate\_Dead\_monument\_in\_front\_of\_Texas\_State\_Capitol-front\_view.JPG

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and women had lived most contentedly when they were enslaved."

According to the Make It Right website, the memorial, dedicated to Heyward Shepherd—a free black man accidentally killed in abolitionist John Brown's failed uprising—"corrupts history to laud the 'faithfulness of thousands of negroes' who did not take up arms against their oppressors."

A placard at the site notes that in 1905, the United Daughters of the Confederacy said the memorial would "prove that the people of the South who owned slaves valued and respected their good qualities as no one else ever did or will do." The Make It Right Project is dedicated not just to removing the Confederate monuments, but also to developing post-removal protocols to properly contextualize these markers.

As for the Heyward Shepherd Memorial, Holloway stated the end goal would be a museum onsite or in West Virginia that could properly historicize the monument. To those who believe relocating the monument would erase history, Holloway maintained that this argument "holds no water." She argued instead that the opposite is true: "Monuments were put up to erase history." She assured that to relocate these markers that obfuscate the past would be to *correct* the historical record.

Furthermore, Holloway noted, "If it were genuinely about history, there would be monuments to Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, or John Brown." But, she added, "... history isn't in monuments; it's in television, media, and libraries." Thus, the notion to relocate the landmark to a more fitting context rather than keeping them in places inapt for their intent.



Local activists gathered last month to continue the protest against the Confederate plaque still attached to the front of the Jefferson County Courthouse in downtown Charles Town.

**Not Going Away**

Of the Jefferson County plaque debate, and those fighting to have it removed, Holloway expressed, "I know that we [Make It Right] have a very specific target that we are working toward, and the plaque isn't on our list, but even though we have different targets, the mission is the same. I would be happy to support their mission where I can."

During a meeting in January of this year, Jefferson County Commissioner Peter Onoszko said of the plaque debate that it was pretty much dead, but members of Women's March West Virginia continue sitting in on nearly every Jefferson County Commission meeting, holding signs that read, simply, "Remove the plaque."

Susan Pipes, an outreach captain of Women's March West Virginia, said, "That's all we do—sit there. We don't address them anymore—just remind them that we're going to keep reminding them ... that this isn't an issue that will die."

Pipes revealed that Commission President Josh Compton told the group, "I admire you for using your First Amendment right, but I really thought this issue with the plaque would go away."

Pipes pointed out that the Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission removed a rock from the courthouse lawn as well as a sign that talked about John Brown. She explained that these were removed when the commission redid the grounds in an attempt to remove anything from structured grounds that wasn't original or necessary. There are postcards of the courthouse for sale at the Visitor Center in Harpers Ferry on which you can see the sign in the lawn. Pipes urged, "They are about to paint the courthouse. It is a perfect time to *keep* the plaque off. It has to be taken off, anyway."

In regards to those who resist the plaque's relocating, Pipes believes these people feel history will be changed. With multiple instances across the country where statues are being destroyed or taken down in the middle of the night, Pipes feels those opposed to removing the plaque imagine Women's March, and others in favor, are only adding to the issues and possible violence.

"I also feel they believe their part [of history] is being destroyed," she said, "but nobody is denying that they fought in the war—those are their families." But she underscored that the mission is about more than that. "I have to be able to be one of those people on the right side of history. That's what this is about—making it right."

ARTICLE BY: Katie Quinnelly

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