

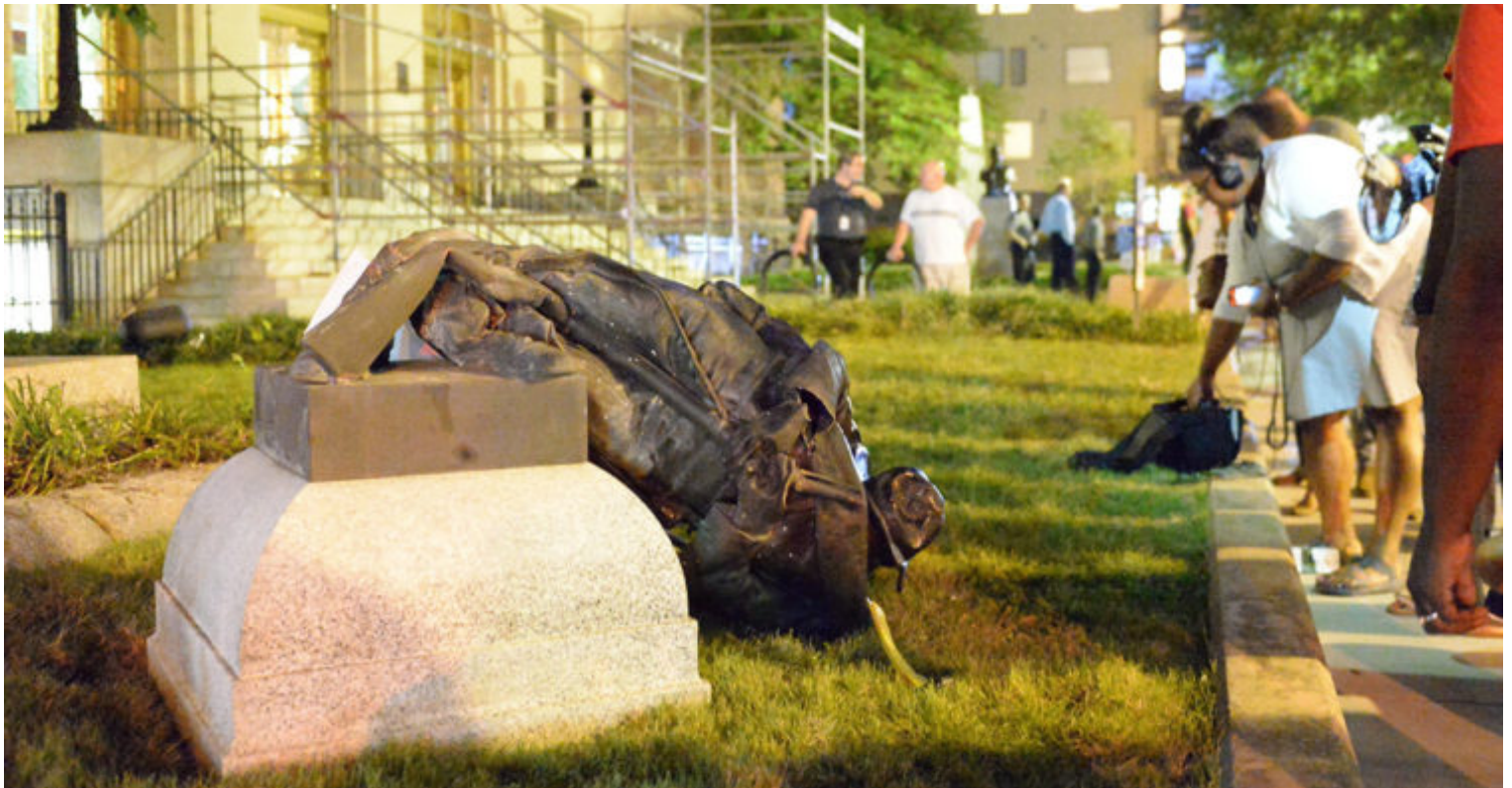
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## Reflections on a Silent Soldier

After the television cameras went away, a North Carolina city debated the future of its toppled Confederate statue

By [Robin Kirk](https://theamericanscholar.org/author/robin-kirk/) | September 3, 2019

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The silent sentinel statue depicting a nameless enlisted Confederate soldier, was toppled from its plinth two years ago by a coalition of protesters. (Alamy)

In the early evening of August 14, 2017, a young woman climbed a ladder and looped a yellow strap around the neck of the “silent sentinel”—a statue of a Confederate soldier that had stood for nearly a century in front of the old county courthouse in Durham, North Carolina. More than 100 protesters had gathered to watch. Consisting mainly of young people of color, graduate students,

union members, and gay activists, they represented a coalition of groups loosely organized as “Defend Durham.” Some of them had clashed with the alt before. Now, steps away from one of Durham’s neoclassic tug-of-war-style line and pulled on the yellow strap.

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The statue and its base detached from the stone plinth, hitting the grass with a thud. Likely made of cheap stamped zinc, the sentinel crumpled like a beer can. As the crowd cheered, some protesters spat on and kicked it. Durham authorities charged seven people that evening with “acts of vandalism,” though a judge would later dismiss the charges.

Many residents, especially newcomers, had barely noticed the statue or understood what it symbolized. But for black Durham, the silent sentinel had been a constant reminder of the injustices of slavery and Jim Crow. As the national media focused on Durham, city and county officials realized that repairing the statue and returning it to its pedestal would be impossible. The same questions surrounding Confederate statuary all over the South were now being asked in the city where I live and work. During a meeting of local officials, Durham County Commissioner James Hill said, “I think everyone needs to understand we’re not trying to erase history. ... We’re trying to highlight it and trying to make people face it.”

Early in 2018, the mayor of Durham, Steve Schewel, asked me to co-chair a citizens committee to discuss what the county and city should do with the toppled Confederate statue and its still-standing pedestal. Our job would be to gauge public opinion and make recommendations to elected officials. I knew the mayor—Steve is a friend, neighbor, and colleague at Duke University—and he was aware of my academic interests. I have studied how countries such as Chile, Argentina, Cambodia, and Rwanda have used the histories of atrocity to promote human rights or to teach about genocide. My research has also helped me better understand the history of our region and of Duke University in particular. I have worked with students, archivists, a mapmaker, and others to tell the stories of the black students who integrated campus, the Duke librarian who started the nation’s first bookmobiles and helped establish the Durham Colored Library in 1916, the campus janitor who helped unionize workers, and the enslaved people whose labor enriched the Duke family and formed the foundation of the fortune that endowed the university.

What, I wondered, would it be like to step beyond campus and enter Durham's lively political scene? My only previous experience in public service had been as a deputy mayor. To the mayor, I couldn't resist the challenge. So I took a deep breath and

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Charmaine McKissick-Melton, a professor of mass communications at Durham's North Carolina Central University (NCCU), agreed to co-chair. I had worked with Charmaine before and admired her quick wit and straight-to-the-point style. She's also a civil rights activist, daughter of Floyd McKissick Sr., an attorney and later a judge who led the Congress of Racial Equality. In 1959, he sued to integrate Durham public schools, and in 1963, just days after the March on Washington, Charmaine's third-grade class was the first to break the school district's color barrier. To fill the committee, the city named five people and the county five more: four professors, an independent historian and journalist, a young videographer, a recently graduated NCCU student, a Civil War reenactor and member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, a city planner, and a preservationist—all Durham residents.

Our task placed us squarely in the midst of one of the major culture-war issues of our time. To date, seven southern legislatures, including North Carolina's, have passed laws limiting the ability of city and county governments to make their own decisions about removing or altering historical monuments. The North Carolina law, adopted in 2015, states that "a monument, memorial, or work of art owned by the State may not be removed, relocated, or altered in any way without the approval of the North Carolina Historical Commission." The laws were passed to protect Confederate memorials like Durham's. The North Carolina General Assembly remains in Republican hands (albeit since November 2018 without a supermajority), and the fate of the statue threw a wide political shadow.

From the outset, our committee made it clear that we would not engage with the rights and wrongs of how the statue came down. Charmaine stated this at the beginning of every meeting, though of course that didn't prevent citizens from voicing their opinions. We were even less successful in limiting public comment on the minutiae of the Civil War.

Yet we insisted. Our task was the *future*: What message do we want to send now with our public memorials and how will those memorials reflect our own divergent values while speaking to later generations? Committee member and historian Watson Jennison put this succinctly, urging us to

operate with humility when thinking about how our decisions will be viewed in the years to come.

Those who raised these statues in the past, he pointed out, profoundly their values would be questioned less than a century

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Durham is distinct from many southern cities that host universities and have Confederate statues: neither the city nor the county existed during the Civil War. Durham took shape after the war, fed by tobacco and the railroad. To get prized bright-leaf tobacco to northern markets, merchants such as Washington Duke and Julian S. Carr needed warehouse workers to grade and pack leaf, to weave tobacco bags, and later to run newfangled cigarette-making machines. Formerly enslaved people flocked here for work. Carr and Duke were the grand philanthropists of their day, and they directed their largesse to white and black institutions, founding Duke and the historically black college now known as NCCU.

Although Durham enforced the same violent segregation as other places, the African-American community found ways to prosper. After the Civil War, two black veterans who'd fought for the Union, brothers Richard and Robert Fitzgerald, moved south and contributed much to the city's success. Richard made bricks (perfect for fire-prone tobacco warehouses, their vibrant red color giving Durham a distinctive character), investing his wealth in the African-American-owned businesses on Parrish Street—known as Black Wall Street—and building a turreted mansion for his large family. Robert became a teacher. The home he and his wife constructed in the city's West End is now a National Historic Landmark that honors his granddaughter Pauli Murray, an early civil and human rights pioneer. Both Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois cited Durham and its Black Wall Street as evidence of how blacks could succeed in America.

As my earlier research showed, Carr and the Duke family dealt quite differently with Reconstruction and Jim Crow. A generation older than Carr, Duke had been a yeoman farmer before the war. He owned (as far as we can tell) an enslaved woman, Caroline, to help with the household and children. Duke also hired enslaved laborers from others during harvest season. But unlike Carr, who volunteered for the Confederate army at 18, Duke was conscripted at 44 and had to sell everything to provide for his family in his absence. When he returned home after the war—famously walking 134 miles from the port at New Bern—he did something unusual for a white man of his age and class. He became a Republican, joining the party of African-American emancipation and enfranchisement.

In contrast, Carr, the son of a Chapel Hill merchant and slave owner, came from wealth. He attended UNC–Chapel Hill, one of the country’s oldest public universities. Carr’s family was one of the many families sent their sons to Chapel Hill, partially built and maintained by the state. After the Civil War ended, Carr bought the company that developed the Bull Durham tobacco trademark and expanded into textiles, the railroad, newspapers, and public utilities, becoming one of the state’s richest men. Typical of wealthy whites, Carr embraced the Democrats and their white supremacy platform. He also joined the Ku Klux Klan twice—first when it formed, then later when the group was reborn.

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Like Duke, Carr donated to black charities, but he made it clear that blacks should always be subservient to whites. Though he said he abhorred lynching, he viewed it as an understandable response to attacks on white women (a fiction that occasioned a great deal of torture and murder in the South). Carr financially backed the white supremacy campaigns that led to the 1898 destruction of the African-American community in Wilmington, at the time the state’s largest city, as well as one with a majority-black population.

Carr was also responsible for helping to bring the Confederate monument known as Silent Sam, custom made by the Canadian sculptor John A. Wilson, to the UNC campus at Chapel Hill. Carr was the largest single donor. He delivered a speech at the statue’s 1913 inauguration in which he thanked his fellow veterans for saving “the very life of the Anglo Saxon race in the South,” then bragged about finding “a negro wench” on campus and horse-whipping her “until her skirts hung in shreds.” For him, this was a “pleasing duty.” Carr’s words drew a solid line linking white supremacy and the statue. Given the context, the installation of Silent Sam and hundreds of other Confederate memorials fit what UNC historian Fitzhugh Brundage calls “clear political objectives: [t]hey tended to be erected at times when the South was fighting to resist political rights for black citizens.”

Durham’s first Civil War monument was dedicated in 1923, when the family of a local fertilizer merchant donated land and funds for a monument at Bennett Place, the site of the Confederate army’s final surrender. (Unincorporated during the war, the land later came to be included within Durham’s city limits.) Two Corinthian columns—representing the Confederacy and the Union—support a lintel engraved with the word UNITY. Durham’s chapter of the United Daughters of the

Confederacy—the Julian S. Carr chapter—boycotted the ceremony, calling this “a monument of defeat.” But Carr himself attended and spoke, on his 78th Union veterans.

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A photo from that event shows a black laborer listening to one of the speakers, the tiredness of his bones almost as visible as his worn clothes. Parsing Carr’s speech, we can see that he viewed the monument as another victory for white supremacy, marking the “reunion” of northern and southern whites. “No Confederate soldier,” he said, “has ever been asked to sacrifice the principles for which he fought.”

Durham’s second Civil War monument arrived a year later. The McNeel Marble Company in Marietta, Georgia, sent an inscribed stone base and soldier posed in a style known as “silent sentinel,” with an enlisted man’s uniform, slouch hat, and rifle propped at his boots. In contrast to the support for the Unity Monument, many white people, including the Dukes, declined to contribute money to the Confederate statue. Durham, by then, had a diminished appetite for pure Lost Cause nostalgia. However, the United Daughters of the Confederacy obtained a \$5,000 commitment from Durham County, levied through the imposition of a one-time tax on Durham residents—the only instance I’m aware of in which a Confederate memorial was paid for entirely with public funds. African Americans, at the time largely barred from voting, ended up partially funding the statue. Taxes aside, old man Carr never parted with a dime for it.

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Charmaine and I tried to recover the contemporaneous opinions of African Americans on the Confederate statue, but it proved impossible. Durham had no black newspaper until 1927. The county library archives has no oral histories that mention the memorial. But it’s clear that violent segregation at the time meant that speaking out against a Confederate commemoration was a potentially life-threatening endeavor.

Beginning in May 2018, our committee convened monthly. At first, mainly supporters of the statue attended, giving three-minute presentations on their interpretations of Civil War history or information on family ties to the war. The media came to the first meeting. But in the absence of filmable clashes (the meetings were earnest and largely civil), most of the reporters stopped attending. We expected to hear from Defend Durham, since the statue was so central to the group’s activism. However, Defend Durham activists tended to do their shouting elsewhere: at the press, at

police, and especially at Confederate statue supporters. In eight months, only one member of that coalition spoke to the committee, justifying the toppling of the statue as necessary and the statue trashed.

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During this time, attention had shifted from Durham's silent sentinel to Chapel Hill's Silent Sam, which protesters pulled down on August 20, 2018. After that toppling, neo-Confederates drove in from rural Durham and nearby Alamance and Caswell counties (where the Klan remains a force) to stand beside the empty plinth. Their insistence on using the plinth as a rallying point was one reason that UNC Chancellor Carol Folt removed it in January 2019, at the cost of the board of governors' ire and her job.

The neo-Confederates came to every one of our meetings, insisting that statues were history and that their removal amounted to erasure. It quickly became clear that nothing our committee could do would satisfy either Defend Durham or the neo-Confederates. Neither party was interested in a community conversation or a deeper dive into Durham's history or even a discussion of what new memorial sites could be erected to honor our region's past. At least we'd provided both extremes with something to agree on.

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When I moved to Durham in 1992, a paternal aunt showed me a photograph of five soldiers taken during the Civil War. The one with the extravagant muttonchops was my great-great-grandfather. On the right sits his more notorious elder brother, George Washington Kirk. Like many eastern Tennesseans, the Kirks were Union men (the state sent more men to fight for the Union than any other Confederate state by far), and their unit led successful raids against the Confederacy throughout the war. A courthouse in western North Carolina still features a painting of the Kirk brothers riding through town, the bridles of their horses dangling looted silver cutlery.

In 1870, North Carolina's governor needed help fighting the Ku Klux Klan and called George back to service, in part because of his fearsome reputation. Klansmen were running rampant, and in one case, they seized Wyatt Outlaw—a black Republican, officeholder, and Union vet—from his home and lynched him outside the Alamance County Courthouse. The Klan counted on white business owners, the sheriff, and elected officials to look the other way—they did just that. In just a few months, Kirk and his men arrested more than 100 suspected Klan members. But like other whites

who supported Reconstruction, they were vilified as lawbreakers. The backlash was devastating.

The governor was impeached, and Kirk fled, never to return. The violence that still shapes the South.

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The Kirks are marvelous storytellers. But not once did any of my relatives ever speak of our scalawag forebears. Why? As veterans of a brutal conflict, the Kirks may not have wanted to share these stories. As whites, they may have feared being shunned for supporting equal rights for blacks. The result, though, is that my white family, like so many others, lost or erased a crucial part of our history—a history that stands in stark contrast to Lost Cause nostalgia.

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During our meeting on August 23, 2018, a combat veteran spoke eloquently about the message he took from the statue’s toppling. He had spent six years fighting another “illegal and unpopular war” (from his age, I assumed he meant Iraq). The men honored by Durham’s memorial were like him, he said: mainly the poor who “didn’t have much of a say any more than I did.” He noted that North Carolina, with its numerous military bases, is one of the most militarized states in the country and is on track to be home to the most veterans per capita by 2020. “I saw a replica of a human being like me getting a rope thrown around his neck and torn down.”

That comment moved me profoundly. Often, we heard statue protesters use the word *traitor* to describe Confederate soldiers. I’d flinch, since this seemed as much a twisting of history as the neo-Confederate refusal to acknowledge that the Civil War was about slavery. For me, there is a crucial difference between statues of the leading proponents and defenders of slavery, like John C. Calhoun or Robert E. Lee, and Durham’s memorial, meant to honor the average soldier. History tells us that North Carolina was profoundly divided on slavery, and many soldiers were forced to fight—something neither Defend Durham nor the neo-Confederates would acknowledge.

Like all young men who go to war, Durham’s Confederates marched off for reasons that likely had at least as much to do with the promise of adventure, pride in the home state, or a steady paycheck as with slavery. Regardless of the reason, few understood the risks, typical of any group of young men (and I speak as the parent of one). The risks included death not just in battle but also from disease, exhaustion, exposure, and—by far the greatest threat—starvation. By 1863, when Washington Duke was conscripted, the draft age had been raised to 50, a glaring sign of Confederate desperation.



# Before we memorials should be torn down, we should pose another question: shall we stop telling the young that war is honorable, an adventure, a path to success?

Although my family, including the scalawag Kirks, has a long history of military service, my father's immediate family members were conscientious objectors. But my father wanted to fly, so he joined the Navy. Before he got far, the Navy realized he had astigmatism and booted him out—just in time for him to be drafted by the Army. He was a young man with wild dreams who ended up angrily ticking off supply lists in a Korean Quonset hut. He hated the Army and ended up hating war.

If he had died in Korea, I don't know if my mother would have valued a memorial symbolizing his sacrifice. But no one would have conflated his forced service with support of anything other than a determination to avoid being jailed as a draft dodger. I imagine some of North Carolina's Civil War soldiers, Union and Confederate alike, were more like my dad than not.

Among our committee members, William O'Quinn had the most visceral connection with the Confederate dead. A former commander of the Capitol Brigade, an affiliate of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, he told me about going to a site threatened by planned road construction, to recover the remains of the Hollemans, Confederate brothers buried there. The area's highly acidic soil causes bone and teeth to decay quickly, and all that remained were buttons and nails, which were reburied in Raleigh's Oakwood Cemetery. Two regiments of war reenactors served as honor guards and burial detail.

Hearing stories like that, I came to see memorials as points on a spectrum. On one extreme are monuments to figures like Nathan Bedford Forrest, still the most honored Confederate Tennessean. As a Confederate general, Forrest committed many war crimes, including massacring surrendered

Union soldiers, most of them black, at Fort Pillow in 1864. After the war, he helped form the Klan and was elected its first grand wizard, in charge of the mu  
At the other end of the spectrum are the nameless young r  
squandered, their remains, in some cases, given a proper internment 150 years after their death.

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Before we ask whether all war memorials should be torn down, we should pose another question: shall we stop telling the young that war is honorable, an adventure, a path to success? I think of my dad, now passed on, hating the men who'd sent him so far away from his family. I think he'd say yes.

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Osha Gray Davidson's *The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South*, which was made into a film that opened in April, relates the story of another famous Durham committee, convened in 1971 and meant to forge community agreement on the merging of the largely segregated public schools in both the city and the county. In his book, Davidson explored in depth how the two co-chairs—black activist Ann Atwater and Klan leader C. P. Ellis—not only worked together but also became close friends. Or, as Atwater insisted at Ellis's funeral in 2005, as close as a sister is to a brother.

Ellis's raw racism and Atwater's life-threatening clapbacks (she once had to be restrained from knifing Ellis) were as much a product of their time as the careful tiptoeing we were doing in our committee. The issue they were charged with resolving was in many ways more fraught than the fate of a single statue that was never all that popular. Certain elements, however, connect. In particular, they believed in the power of "close listening," which became a core value of our committee. But how to do that when so many are entrenched in their views?

In four of our meetings, we made a format change. Instead of lining people up for public comment, we broke into facilitated groups and asked participants to respond to three questions. The first was what community values should be represented, recognized, and celebrated in our public memorials. Next, we asked what memorials or historic markers were missing from our community and what stories, people, places, or events could be publicly recognized. The final question was the most obvious: considering the legal constraints on altering any existing objects of public remembrance, what do you think could be done with the existing statue and monument in a way that reflects our shared values?

By starting with values, the discussions inevitably produced consensus about certain themes, among them historical accuracy, inclusivity, and tolerance response to the second question. Even the committed neo-recognition of its tobacco and mill worker past is woefully inadequate.

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In a meeting in north Durham, the most rural and white part of the county, I sat at a table with an older man who had fueled himself with whiskey. He was belligerent and had come ready to fight. I knew he would be talking about heritage, the preservation of “history,” and the true cause of the war (northern aggression). The first question, however, threw him off his alcohol-dimmed talking points. When we got to the second question, he was truly flummoxed, until someone mentioned honoring local mill workers. The man’s parents had been mill workers, solidly working class. He brightened, allowing that this was a pretty good idea. I offered a suggestion, that Durham honor Ann Atwater and C. P. Ellis, who ended his service to the 1971 committee by publicly ripping up his Klan membership card.

The man practically beamed. “I knew C. P. Ellis,” he said with a wink. “C. P. Ellis was a friend of mine *back in the day.*”

The last words were all I needed to confirm that the man had belonged to the Klan. Once he’d delivered that endorsement, he wove out of the room in a boozy haze.

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Ultimately, the committee reached a consensus. The statue itself, we wrote in our final report, should be preserved in its current, crumpled state, in a hallway of the county building nearest where it once stood. Those who wished to see it could, and those who did not wish to see it could avoid it. As is, the statue speaks about what led to its installation as well as what led to its fall. That solution came as close as we could to conforming to current state law, but it also satisfied many of the values that citizens emphasized in their comments, which included historical accuracy and telling the whole truth about the past. In addition, we recommended that three new elements be added to the outside plinth. One would honor Union veterans like the Fitzgerald brothers. Another would honor enslaved people. A third would honor the women and children who suffered during the war. That satisfied values of inclusivity and telling the broader story.

We added that once the law allowed it, the plinth, with its new elements, should be moved from its prominent government location and placed in a city cemetery. The dead would gain importance over any celebration of white supremacy. I made a specific recommendation on Julian S. Carr, whose name had been removed from a Durham high school building in 2017 and from a building on the Duke campus a year later. (I was part of a committee that successfully recommended the latter.) We asked the city to petition the state to revise highway marker language so that it would mention Carr's support for white supremacy and his membership in the Klan. Finally, we presented a list of people and groups that merited sites: human and civil rights activist Pauli Murray, Ann Atwater, C. P. Ellis, Judge McKissick (Charmaine's father), and tobacco and mill workers, among others.

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The release of our report prompted some controversy. One county commissioner objected to the recommendation that the expanded memorial be moved to either of two city cemeteries. As in many southern cities, Durham's cemeteries once segregated the dead. The commissioner objected to the idea that any remnant of Lost Cause nostalgia, even accompanied by elements honoring African Americans, be moved to the predominantly African-American cemetery. The point certainly merits further discussion. Equally problematic may be moving the new African-American elements to the predominantly white cemetery.

Our work was hard and often challenging, and it unexpectedly brought up parts of my personal history. Yet I came away from it deeply grateful. As I reflect on the experience, I think that's how it should be. All sites are ultimately mirrors in which we may glimpse something of what makes us who we are. They are also time capsules, showing us where we've been, moments we may think of with anger or shame or, in the best of circumstances, pride and a sense of new strength to make the world better for those who come next. They challenge us to reflect and think deeply, ever more rare in our speeded-up world. The conversation can be difficult. But I don't see any other way.

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