



Monumental growth

Tributes to Black history are replacing Confederate statues and reclaiming public space

Krystal Nurse USA TODAY

For nearly 100 years, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's 10,000-pound monument rode high over the city of Charlottesville, Virginia. Now, it's been melted into bronze slabs and another memorial in town has risen to national prominence. • It's on the University of Virginia campus, titled the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers. It stands as the antithesis to the Confederacy, honoring the slaves forced to work at the university in the 1800s as carpenters, blacksmiths, roofers, stone carvers and other back-breaking trades.

"All these men, women and children lived with dignity, resisted oppression and aspired for freedom. For more than four decades, the entire University was a site of enslavement," according to the university President's Commission on Slavery.

"Now, we're confronting our past, uncovering new knowledge and using that knowledge to teach, heal and shape the future."

That same monumental transformation in thinking is playing out in dozens of states across the nation, as communities from Alabama to Alaska rethink who the true heroes were from their pasts.

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ABOVE: Artist Lava Thomas provided the digital rendering of Maya Angelou that's expected to be unveiled in San Francisco outside of the city's public library. PROVIDED BY LAVA THOMAS

TOP: The African American Veterans Monument in Buffalo honors Black service members who served during both war and peacetime. Families have purchased commemorative bricks at the site to honor their loved ones. PROVIDED BY ROBIN HODGES

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University of Virginia President's Commission on Slavery

Monuments

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The result is memorials and renaming of historic places that pay homage to honorees who, not so long ago, would have been seen by some community leaders as too obscure or too underprivileged to merit such recognition.

Still, there is some resistance.

Arkansas is one of many Southern states that have passed historic preservation laws to strip local leaders of the power to take down Confederate monuments in their communities. Bills in former Confederate states such as Texas and Florida were introduced in Republican-controlled legislatures in 2023. Similar bills are appearing in states that were not part of the Confederacy, including New York and Pennsylvania.

The monuments honoring states' first Black politicians, veterans or other Black pioneers, are popping up across the country. Significant statues stand tall in Wisconsin, Virginia, Mississippi and Oregon, praising Black people for their accomplishments and how they've helped shape American history.

"It's honoring the extraordinary and the ordinary or the extraordinary and the every day," said Salamishah Tillet, a professor of creative writing and African studies at Rutgers University-Newark.

Sojourner Truth, born into slavery, was an American abolitionist and activist for African American civil rights in the 1800s. Along with a memorial in Akron, Ohio, she is also the first African American woman to have a statue in the U.S. Capitol building.

"It is exciting to see local visionaries are being celebrated for the role that they have supported in their local community," said Brent Leggs, executive director of the African American Cultural Heritage Fund, after seeing Truth memorialized in Akron, Ohio.

'Cultural renaissance' across US

The new monuments signify more of a democratic process in determining who gets honored, with more opinions invited throughout a community on who should receive a statue, plaque, or other honor. For instance, at the University of Virginia, American studies and history Professor Kirt von Daacke said the university had dozens of students,



Al Wakefield, left, and Gerry Fernandez visit the Ernie and Willa Royal statue in Rutland, Vt. The stone statue is an interactive piece in the town's downtown area honoring Ernie Royal, the state's first Black restaurant owner and the first Black board member of the National Restaurant Association. PROVIDED BY STEVE COSTELLO

staff and others in the community involved in creating the enslaved laborers memorial.

"So the end product is a beautiful work of art that speaks to the lives of the enslaved and honors their histories," he said.

Leggs said the monuments sprouting up across the U.S. put the country into a "cultural renaissance" empowering locals to tell stories of their neighbors through art and "memorialization that we will ... create a new commemorative landscape that centers Blackness at the core of American democracy."

In Madison, Wisconsin, officials unveiled the statue of Velvlea "Vel" Phillips, created by Radcliffe Bailey, in July on Capitol grounds. Phillips achieved many firsts as a Black woman in the state. She died in 2018 at 95.

Michael Johnson, president and CEO of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Dane County, said the statue came out of a conversation with activists requesting he use his influence to build representation at the state capitol.

In Rutland, Vermont, a stone statue sits in the city's downtown area of Ernie and Willa Royal.

Ernie Royal is credited for being the state's first Black restaurant owner and the first Black board member of the National Restaurant Association. The statue has stood there since May. The interactive life-sized sculpture features Willa arranging flowers at a table and Ernie working with younger staffers in the restaurant.

Ernie, who died in 1994 at 76, left his estate to support a scholarship for Black students at the Culinary Institute of America. His restaurant, Royal's Hearthside, operated from 1963 to his death.

Steve Costello, who helped fund the sculpture with his wife Jane and other locals, said the idea began as a way to build a trail with sculptures, but not "the typical sculptures the U.S. has produced of a bunch of old white guys like me," he said. The group researched and learned about Ernie and his restaurant.

"The sculpture really, for me, captures exactly who they were and what they were in the community," Costello said. "They were people who drew the community together for big events, for important dinners, for important meals, for the times that you want to remem-

ber."

In Buffalo, New York, the African American Veterans Monument, honoring Black service members, sits at the Buffalo and Erie County Naval and Military Park. The monument has 12 cylindrical pillars that illuminate at night and represent 12 wars and the peacetime between them.

Robin Hodges, chief of operations for the monument, said the project started in 2012 with a group of about five Black residents who wanted to honor those service members.

In San Francisco, poet Maya Angelou will be immortalized at the city's main library by artist Lava Thomas. Angelou was known for her autobiography "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" and the anthology "And Still I Rise." Thomas said that creating Angelou's sculpture is powerful to her as a Black woman; Angelou has been a "shero" to her since Angelou's autobiography.

'Better informed' American history

Opponents say that removing Confederate monuments is tantamount to erasing history, with some Southern states passing laws to stop their removal.

One example is in Fort Smith, Arkansas, where for over a century, a life-size statue of a Confederate soldier has stood atop a towering monument.

The city administrator had considered removing the monument for years. Then the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 ignited a national conversation about Confederate monuments and sparked new calls to take it down.

But before local leaders could decide its fate, the Arkansas Legislature revoked their power.

Future monuments are going to be more involved and likely created with intentions to be moved elsewhere, Salamishah and Scheherazade Tillet said.

They see the current rising number of Black monuments trickling down to other racial and ethnic groups to better represent not only the country in general but also the atrocities and achievements of the past.

And then, there are memorials to just regular people.

"The people who are being presented are just reflective of America as it's always been," Salamishah Tillet said.

Contributing: Abhinav S. Krishnan, USA TODAY