

Richmond Confederate Soldiers & Sailors Monument

Update: At the time this essay was originally written, although the statue had been removed, the column was still present. In early 2022, the Doric column was also dismantled.

Standing guard above the eastern edge of the city and overlooking the James River in Libby Park is the Confederate Soldiers & Sailors Monument. The monument stands in a circle adjacent to the city's Libby Hill Park, established in 1851. The park provides a panoramic view of downtown, including Main Street, down which Union troops entered the city on April 3, 1865. Rather than being dedicated to an individual such as a general or statesman, it honors the common fighting man of the Confederate military. The soldier on top faced west towards the city center and the Capitol building, before it was removed in 2020.

Libby Hill Park was first known as Jefferson, the Marshall Park in the nineteenth century. Today the park, and the entire neighborhood, is part of the St. John's Church Historic District, established in 1957 by the city. The historic district includes ordinances regulating construction and architecture, and the designation was the first in the city, jump starting historic preservation in Richmond. The district is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, with the monument being one of the contributing features to the district's historic significance.

There are several Civil War connections to the site. Directly across from the monument stands the 1850 Libby House, named for its most famous owner, Luther Libby, whose warehouse was appropriated by Confederate authorities for a prison for Union officers. Following the city's capture on April 3, 1865, Libby Hill Park itself was occupied by Union troops: first the 9th Vermont, then later some U.S. Colored Troops camped on the hilltop, in front of the monument's future site (it is not known which U.S.C.T. regiments formed this encampment).

Located in Richmond's oldest neighborhood, and overlooking the James River where the city was founded, Libby Hill was a prominent location and an ideal site for a memorial. After the Civil War several businessmen and city leaders suggested placing a monument honoring Robert E. Lee at this site, but a more prominent location on Monument Avenue was chosen instead. The Lee monument went up there in 1890 with great fanfare. That location has since been the focus of protests in 2020 about the city's Confederate monuments.

The Soldiers & Sailors monument was designed by city engineer Wilfred Cutshaw, who drew inspiration from Pompey's Pillar in Alexandria, Egypt. The Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monument is an almost exact copy, with a decorative capital (top). The granite shaft is 73 feet high and was topped with a 13-foot-tall bronze soldier, making the entire monument an even 100 feet. The soldier sculpture stood on guard with a rifle at his side and was commissioned for this particular monument, unlike the mass-produced standing soldiers commonly visible atop common soldiers' monuments across the States. Thirteen stone sections make up the column, representing the thirteen Confederate States (only 11 seceded, but the Confederate government

accepted representatives from Kentucky and Missouri, and considered them part of the Confederacy).

Starting in 1887, 22 years after the war, several Richmond businessmen and city officers began discussing the idea of placing a monument to the memory of Confederate soldiers and sailors. In 1889 they formed the Confederate Soldiers & Sailors Monument Association to design, raise funds, and erect the monument. Rather than commemorate a general or political leader, their stated goal was "to perpetuate the memory and deeds of the Private Soldiers and Sailors of the Confederate States." Richmond City Council supported the endeavor with \$5,000 and by donating the land for the location.

The state legislature appropriated \$3,200 dollars for the effort. Appeals to other state governments for funding were not successful, but various Confederate veterans' groups contributed support. The association held opera performances and other fundraisers which brought in additional monies. Women's groups in the city contributed proceeds from a bazaar.

The monument was Dedicated May 30, 1894, Confederate Memorial Day, a fairly new holiday that emphasized the placing of flowers on graves. Ladies' Memorial Associations across the South established the holiday, and it developed separately from Decoration Day in the North. Confederate veteran and future Richmond mayor Carlton McCarthy spoke at the ceremony. An estimated 10,000 from across the South attended and the chief marshal for the day was former Confederate general and former governor Fitzhugh Lee (nephew of the famous general).

Newspapers like the *Richmond Dispatch* noted that the city was "filling up" with visitors. Trains brought military units, Confederate veterans, and visitors to witness the unveiling. The parade route wound through downtown's principal streets and brought the procession to a grandstand at the site in Libby Hill Park.

Local militia units, bands, Confederate veterans, Virginia Military Institute cadets, and school children all participated in the parade. Former Confederate generals and officers were in attendance.

The dedication program for the day includes images of the Confederate battle flag, photos of this and other Confederate monuments, and various celebrated Confederate officers, and poems. The seal of the Confederacy is prominently featured. It also includes Gen. Robert E. Lee's 'General Orders No. 9', announcing the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox, thus giving the program a somber feel but linking it to the Lost Cause ideology that emphasized Confederate bravery, sacrifice, and loss.

Poems and articles in the dedication program also emphasize valor, mourning, and the importance of commemorating the Confederate dead. One of the poems, "Our Dead," appeals to its readers to take up and venerate the memories of the slain:

Gather the sacred dust
Of the warriors tried and true.
Who bore the flag of our nation's trust,

And died for me and you.

Governor Charley T. O’Ferrall spoke at the dedication on May 30, and the main speaker was Rev. R.C. Cave. Like the poetry included in the programme, speeches by various dignitaries focused on the themes of sacrifice, loss, duty, and patriotism. Dr. Hoge suggested that the monument would be an “enduring column to testify that their memories are not lost” and that their cause was in “defense of constitutional liberty.” Rev. Cave spoke of slavery being “humane” and “fastened upon the South.” He went on to say that “It was not to perpetuate slavery that they fought” but rather, Confederate soldiers “battled for freedom.” He also notes that the South was right, justified in secession, and only defeated by brute force and numbers.

The monument’s erection and dedication took place during the period of Jim Crow, with African Americans largely excluded from voting, holding office, or having a say in political decisions – let alone the prominent erection of monuments within the public sphere. Nevertheless, African American newspapers such as the *Richmond Planet* produced their own commentaries on the monument’s dedication. One writer for the *Planet* noted a few days later that,

The Confederate Soldiers’ and Sailor’s Monument was unveiled on last Wednesday. It stands to commemorate those who stood up for the “Lost Cause.” Confederate flags were everywhere displayed. The procession was an hour and a quarter passing a given point. Just before reaching the scene of the unveiling, a pitiless rain fell which soaked the soldiers, and also the women and children and made cheerless and dreary the delivery of the oration and the reading of the poem. Booming cannon and the roar of musketry greeted the unveiled but silent sentinel.

The paper clearly disapproved of the monument, but perhaps was reserved in its criticism because of local tensions or the need to keep goodwill with the white community.

Ironically, just one mile to the east of the monument is Richmond National Cemetery, whose origins date to the years immediately after the war when Union dead were gathered from hospital sites and battlefields to be buried in some of the country’s first federal military cemeteries. The black population of Richmond held Memorial Day events here in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, directly linking the war to their freedom. Just a few days after Confederate veterans dedicated their monument on Libby Hill, Union veterans and the black population commemorated Memorial Day at the cemetery. A black orator that day called on the men of the crowd to, “assert your manhood under all circumstances . . . When we fail to assert our manhood we prove that we are an inferior race.” Already underlying tensions were manifest as competing memories of the war emerged in this early commemorative period.

Segregation and Jim Crow laws became firmly entrenched in the early decades of the twentieth century. By the 1960s the Civil Rights Movement brought the issue of racial tension to the forefront of the nation’s consciousness. At the same time, the Civil War Centennial was underway, and Richmond prepared to play a major role. On November 4, 1964, the city embellished the Soldiers and Sailors Monument by adding lighting to illuminate it at night. A ceremony was held by Mayor Morrill Martin Crowe, and the event was used to mark the Centennial. It was one of a large number of special events throughout Virginia, Richmond, and the wider U.S. that commemorated the war, often with a celebratory tone. This was also an era

defined by racial tension and desegregation in the state, and while the state of Virginia had formally resisted federal orders to integrate schools throughout the preceding years it was not out of place at all for the city government or local politicians to publicly fund and support this type of effort for a Confederate monument.

To this day the monument, while not among the more well known in the city (such as those along Monument Avenue), is a recognizable landmark of the Church Hill neighborhood. The local Church Hill Association, a community group, frequently used the image of the soldier for its annual barbeque festival fundraiser, replacing his rifle with a fork. The monument is also prominently featured in decorative flags sold by the group as a fundraiser. The Association donates to local charities, spruces up parks in the local area, and supports other neighborhood improvements. Since the protests and removal of monuments in the summer of 2020, the image has not been used by the Association. Similarly, the city of Richmond once used an image of the Lee Monument as its logo, but has quietly replaced it with an image of a black waterman.

Following a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, debate about Confederate monuments took center stage across the country. That Fall Democrats gained full control of the state legislature in the elections for the first time in more than two decades. They amended a state law on monuments, allowing local communities to “remove, relocate, contextualize, cover or alter” monuments, providing they went through a formal process (Virginia Code 15.2-1812). Democratic Governor Ralph Northam signed the bill in April 2020 and it went into effect July 1.

In the meantime, Mayor Lavar Stoney and Richmond City Council organized a commission to study the Richmond monuments. In July 2018, the panel suggested removing the Jefferson Davis monument, adding a monument to African Americans who fought for the Union, and adding interpretive text to the remaining Confederate statues in the city.

During May and June 2020, while protests erupted across the nation resulting from the death of George Floyd in Minnesota, demonstrations were held at Confederate monuments in Richmond, mostly along Monument Avenue. The Soldiers & Sailors Monument was repeatedly targeted with spray paint. Various messages included "Black Lives Matter," "Racists," and other references to racism and violence against African Americans. Unlike those on Monument Avenue, this particular monument was not the scene of protests or clashes, possibly because it stands alone in a quiet neighborhood, and does not feature a well-known personality like Robert E. Lee or Stonewall Jackson.

For several weeks in May and June, the monument was targeted nearly weekly with spray-paint at night by protestors. A group of citizens, including members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, began coming early in the mornings to clean the monument. They set up a perimeter of armed guards while others scrubbed or painted over the graffiti. This cycle of graffiti and cleaning continued for several weeks until tensions subsided.

Protests in downtown Richmond that summer had become violent, with police clashes and damage to businesses. One crowd tore down a statue to Confederate General William Wickham, toppled Christopher Columbus, and tore down the Davis statue. In Portsmouth a protestor was

injured while assaulting the Portsmouth Confederate monument. Citing public safety in an emergency, Mayor Stoney asked Richmond City Council to approve a plan to immediately remove the city's Confederate monuments when the changes to the state law went into effect on July 1, 2020. This was done and the Jackson statue on Monument Avenue came down on that very day.

On July 8, 2020, the city of Richmond sent work crews to remove the soldier from the Soldier's and Sailor's monument in Libby Hill Park. The statue was put in storage, to be sold along with the others removed by the city. As of August 2021 it has not been sold, and the monument's column still stands. The words "Tear It Down" remain spray painted on the street in a circle around the monument's base. It has not otherwise been targeted with graffiti since late summer 2020, and the city does plan to remove the column but plans have not been made public as of August, 2021.

Primary Sources

Postcard by Hugh C. Leighton Co., Manufacturers, Portland, ME., circa 1907. *Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries Digital Collections - Rarely Seen Richmond*.
This is an early photo of the monument.

Richmond Planet, June 2, 1894. [Available at www.chorniclingamerica.loc.gov]
This article provides an insight into the black community's reaction to the monument.

[Souvenir, unveiling soldiers' and sailors' monument, Richmond, Virginia, May 30, 1894 : Confederate Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument Association, Richmond : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

The souvenir from the monument's dedication has a wealth of information about the monument and those who planned and funded it.

Secondary Sources

Layton, Robert C. *Discovering Richmond Monuments* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2013).
Layton's work provides a brief overview of each of the city's monuments, including information on their planning and dedication.

Scott, Mary Wingfield. *Old Richmond Neighborhoods* (Richmond, VA: 1950).
Written by the leading preservationist of the city's old homes, this book provides an overview of a history of the Church Hill neighborhood where the monument stands.

[Confederate Soldiers & Sailors Monument Historical Marker \(www.hmdb.org\)](#). This website provides entries on the history of monuments, along with maps and photos.

www.monumentavenuecommission.org

This is the website for the Monument Avenue Commission, which in 2018 recommended removing the Davis Monument and contextualizing the others with interpretive panels.

