

11 June 2020

FROM: Kevin Elliott, Assistant Professor, Murray State University

TO: Judge Executive Kenneth Imes

RE: Historical Context of the Murray Confederate Monument

CC: Eddie Clyde Hale (Magistrate, District 1)

Larry Crutcher (Magistrate, District 2)

Don Cherry (Magistrate, District 3)

Paul Rister (Magistrate District 4)

ENCL: Memo on the Historical Context of the Murray Confederate Monument

Dear Judge Imes,

As our community considers whether to remove the Confederate monument located in the Calloway County Courthouse Square, I write to provide some historical context about the monument and its background.

In terms of my own background, I am Assistant Professor of Political Science at Murray State University and hold a Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University. I live in Murray with my family and care deeply about its character as a place to raise moral, upstanding citizens.

I have researched Confederate memorials for some time and recently investigated the history of the Murray Confederate monument. I have reviewed many of the relevant documents including the monument's application to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, examined the archives of the Calloway County chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and consulted scholarly histories of the monument building movement.

Enclosed you will find a brief memo summarizing my findings. It contextualizes the monument in its historical time and makes clear the views of those who erected it. I find that the monument was part of a concerted effort to minimize the importance of slavery in the Civil War and to justify the social and political dominance of white Americans over black Americans. These are important considerations in the public deliberation over whether to remove it.

I am happy to answer any questions this memo may raise and look forward to participating in a cordial public debate unfolding over this issue.

Best wishes,



Kevin J. Elliott
Assistant Professor of Political Science
Murray State University
Email: kelliott13@murraystate.edu

MEMORANDUM

FROM: Kevin Elliott, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Murray State University

TO: Judge Executive Kenneth Imes

RE: Historical Context of the Murray Confederate Monument

This memorandum summarizes research on the Murray Confederate Monument and its historical context. It finds that the monument was part of a concerted effort to minimize the importance of slavery in the Civil War and to justify the social and political dominance of white Americans over black Americans, or white supremacy.

Confederate statues and memorials in the United States were erected as part of a concerted political education campaign meant to rewrite the history of the Civil War in a pro-Confederate, pro-white supremacy direction. The most prolific and successful group behind this effort was the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). As the Murray monument itself attests, it was erected by the UDC's Calloway County affiliate, the J. N. Williams Chapter (805), in 1917.

The UDC's campaign went far beyond the erection of monuments. They also successfully lobbied schools to use textbooks that reflected their pro-Confederate take on history, organized Confederate memorial events and essay contests on Confederate history in schools, and helped put pictures of southern leaders like Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis into virtually every classroom in the South. They also created childrens' chapters that would immerse children in Confederate culture and reward them for learning and repeating elements of Lost Cause dogma. Many if not most middle aged southerners today were educated using textbooks and other materials originally approved, and in some cases written, by members of the UDC.

The UDC's aim was in some sense entirely understandable and humane. They wanted to defend their fathers and grandfathers from the taint of being tarred as rebels and traitors who fought to perpetuate the cruel institution of slavery. In place of a version of history with that uncongenial message, they helped spread one that venerated the Old South as a noble political and social order and the Civil War as one of constitutional principle over the issue of states' rights. This story is known as the ideology of the Lost Cause. The Murray monument is explicitly identified with the Lost Cause in its application to be included on the National Register of Historic Places.

According to the Lost Cause narrative, the Civil War wasn't about slavery at all, nor was the Confederate cause to be identified with its preservation. This version of history helped the UDC achieve its aim since it removed slavery from its central place in the story and allowed those who fought for the Confederacy to be depicted as patriots fighting for a noble cause. Yet for those in our community who do not see history as the UDC would have us do (and who concur with the overwhelming consensus of reputable contemporary historians), slavery remains at the heart of the Civil War, and those who fought on the Confederate side were indeed defending the indefensible. To them, a monument singling out Confederate soldiers, and Robert E. Lee, for veneration seems perverse.

Historical Context of the Murray Confederate Monument

Both the inaugural year and the location of the Murray monument are historically significant as markers of white supremacy. So what was the significance of the year? In two words: Jim Crow. Jim Crow was a social and political system of white supremacy that had two main components: segregation and black disenfranchisement. White supremacy was very much on the rise in 1917. A common misconception about Jim Crow was that it happened all at once around 1877, at the close of Reconstruction. Instead, it happened by phases, starting first with gradual disenfranchisement followed by the institution and elaboration of legal segregation. Large numbers of black citizens were still voting and participating in public affairs in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s. Full disenfranchisement was not in place until the first years of the 1900s. And it was not until after blacks were disfranchised, and could no longer punish officials electorally, that segregation laws poured out of southern state capitols in the first decades of the 20th century. Moreover, the second Ku Klux Klan was inaugurated in Georgia in 1915, and reached its largest membership of about five million in the mid-twenties. For a relatively brief window of time, the Klan was one of the largest groups of any kind in the country, rising at the same time as the UDC. I recite this history to illustrate that, in 1917, when the monument was being raised in Murray, white supremacy was marching in triumph across the land. This was not a coincidence.

We see this in the second historically significant component of the monument: its placement in the courthouse square. There were three major waves of Confederate monument building; one shortly after the end of the Civil War, one between 1910 and 1920, and one in the middle years of the 1950s. Of the three, the middle one was by far the largest, and it was to that wave that the Murray monument belongs. The first wave of monument building tended to be in cemeteries, where the Confederate dead were buried. These first monuments, originating in the years immediately after the war and placed in sites of mourning and remembrance, were generally focused on memorialization, not valorization. It was not until the second wave of monument building that Confederate memorials began to be placed in and around state capitols and courthouses and took on the epic scale and heroic motifs that are most notable today. These monuments quite literally moved the Confederacy out of the graveyard and constituted public celebrations of the figures they depicted and the cause they fought for.

Moreover, by placing them in and around places of political power, the monument builders conveyed an official status to this celebration and, by extension, to the cause itself. They suggested that the power that inhabited those places—the power of the public, which is supposed to belong to all—belonged instead only to those who identified with the story told by the Confederate monuments. This meant, by extension, that political power did *not* belong to those who did not so identify with the monuments' story, as many members of our community today do not. In short, the monuments of the second wave are artifacts of the great rise of white supremacy in the early 20th century that built and elaborated Jim Crow.

We need look no further for concrete evidence of the Murray monument's connection to white supremacy than the archives of the Calloway County chapter of the UDC itself. Within the papers of the Calloway chapter, deposited in the special collection of the Murray State library, one can find two collections of speeches by Mildred Lewis Rutherford, one of the UDC's most famous leaders and UDC historian-general from 1910-1915. All of these speeches were delivered in the years immediately preceding the Murray monument's unveiling in 1917.

Historical Context of the Murray Confederate Monument

In one of these speeches, with the suggestive title “Wrongs of History Righted,” Rutherford defends slavery as an educative and benevolent institution, beloved even by the slaves. In her telling, slavery was “a wonderful missionary and educational enterprise” that brought Africans out of a barbaric existence. Rutherford describes blacks kidnapped through the slave trade in subhuman terms. “What was the condition of the Africans when brought to this country? Savage to the last degree, climbing cocoanut trees to get food, without thought of clothes to cover their bodies, and sometimes cannibals, and all bowing down to fetishes—sticks and stones—as acts of worship.” To Rutherford, black people were like animals, only more depraved, and in need of strict, even cruel, discipline. Training them required “very rigid” laws that “in the light of the present day civilization [seem] excessively cruel.” For bringing them to this country and subjecting them to this cruelty, Rutherford thinks not only that black people ought to be grateful, but that enslaved people were in fact more than content in servitude. “The negro race should give thanks daily that they and their children are not today where their ancestors were before they came into bondage. Was the negro happy under the institution of slavery? They were the happiest set of people on the face of the globe.”

Needless to say, Rutherford’s claims are beneath contempt and do not merit reply. Yet we can see how her story functions to justify white supremacy, and in baldly paternalistic terms. Whites enslaving blacks in the Old South was justified, this account tells us, because blacks were savages in need of civilizing. Whites monopolizing all political and social power for themselves was for black people’s own good, and so stands justified as good for all.

More important than this functional role is that these were the ideas about the character and proper place of black Americans of those who erected the Murray monument. This speech was in the Calloway chapter’s papers, and authored by one of the UDC’s most important leaders. It says that blacks were like animals, only worse, and in need of the strong guiding hand of a master to bring them to civilization. They were not, as a different history would have it, kidnapped, brutalized people unjustly forced to labor and serve a privileged master race. Like their enslaved forebears, blacks in the Jim Crow South should be grateful for their lives in America and for the white race that continued to employ them in domestic and menial work, so long as they abided by the Jim Crow terms of segregation and disenfranchisement set by white authorities.

If the onset of World War I had not prevented the unveiling of the monument with the pomp usually afforded such occasions by the UDC, Rutherford might have been invited to deliver sentiments such as these on the steps of the Calloway County Courthouse. Our courthouse.

This is the history we face when we behold the monument in the courthouse square. It is now up to us, as a community, to decide if that is the story we still want to tell.