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Thinking about Controversial Historic Sites: A Proposal for W&L's National Historic Landmark Sites (8/18/17)

As a college teacher and former National Park Service employee, I've always thought of the historical places designated by our federal government and maintained by many Americans as one big classroom for my students. I also use them as a form of outdoor museum for education as well. Many people don't. Some people see them as a place to run that is both "safe" and "pretty." Yet, they use them and love them. They are and were originally intended as classrooms, teaching tools for all us. Classrooms are the places where we raise difficult questions and assert criticism of ideas, even about controversial symbols. And there is strong basis for this thinking in history and legislation. When the first four National Military Parks were established in the last years of the nineteenth and first years of the twentieth century, the U.S. War Dept. owned and utilized the sites for military maneuvers and later staff rides to teach soldiers about warfare. This usage of these sites continues, but it has also grown to include students of all ages and backgrounds. Anyone who has dealt with a motor coach of fourth graders dumped out onto Little Round Top while they are visiting Gettysburg sees this regularly.

In short, National Battlefields, National Monuments, National Military Parks, National Historic Landmarks (NHL), and even National Register for Historic Places sites are chosen for many culturally significant reasons but generally the idea (Ken Burns called it "America's Best Idea") is that these sites have something to say to all of us about our shared past and shared institutions. We should listen. We should think. We should debate. We should learn. Even if a person is deeply angry with the Abraham Lincoln Memorial for some reason, destruction and vandalism through violence to property or person is not appropriate and should be condemned widely by a people who believe in federal, state, and local laws that govern historic preservation, free speech, and civil assembly.

Furthermore, schools like Washington and Lee University that include NHL sites (The Colonnade, Historic Buildings, and Lee Chapel and Museum) should follow the federal government's interpretive policy lead, which include stated policies and guidelines for historical preservation, many of which have been developed by scholars over decades of discussion and heated debate. (In the case of Civil War sites and Confederate monuments, see the stated NPS policy for interpreting them. Antietam NB recently reaffirmed it. 8/18/17). As the NHL list is administered by the NPS and that status is awarded by a federal agency after careful scrutiny and historical study (often over many years), the integrity of the sites should be resistant to the changes and whims of even local politics. *As a historical site of national importance, W&L's campus landscape and buildings are, were, and should remain an actively taught giant, public history classroom.* The purpose of these designations is not only to raise awareness of the sites but also to provide some measure of protection, cautionary lines so that all Americans can engage and visit the sites, not just now, but always. Contextualizing by professionals and education like the interpretation that goes on in national parks, museums, and other

public spaces every day does work. Museum professionals and public historians do this work every day and succeed. A short visit to the Smithsonian American History or the Holocaust Museum highlights this function of contextualizing “dark history” in public space for education. As a leading national liberal arts institution, W&L has the responsibility to continue to use these sites as educational tools to educate America’s next generation and to educate the public about its sites. In W&L’s case, it is both a private school and national site of importance. The NHL designation would extend to the name on the application for these designations (1. Washington and Lee University Historic District (1972) (and) 2. Lee Chapel (1960 original application). Indeed, the entire Lee Chapel and Museum site is probably the most important cultural site for the creation of the “Lost Cause Mythology” of the Civil War nationally and rightly deserves its NHL designation. It is also a highly important Civil War/Reconstruction site, which merited the original site studies and designation during the Presidency of John F. Kennedy.

As far as the most important Lee monument on our campus, it remains in Lee Chapel’s apse, and both are part of the NHL designation and formal application description of the site. The highly specific placement of the statue placement: “The chamber containing the monument is directly over Lee’s crypt” is part of the application description discussing site integrity. Though “Recumbent Lee” is not a sarcophagus in a traditional sense, it does remain approximately over-top the Lee Family crypt and was dedicated at the same point (1883). It is clear from multiple records from diverse, overlapping archival sources that the Lee family, the Lee Memorial Association (which raised the money for the gift and renovation), and the Board of Trustees in the 1870s and 1880s all intended the cenotaph as a grave marker for the Lee crypt. Burial sites with monuments have also been afforded certain protection under cemetery laws and protections nationwide. Virginia Revised Code is specific about the law related to monuments over gravesites. The additional “War Memorial” section of the Virginia Revised Code also likely applies in this case, but the cemetery law is probably the more directly applicable. Given the description of the room as a mausoleum and the placement of the “Recumbent Lee” at the same time as the family crypt (all dedicated at once), it appears as though they do. (The Flags removed in 2014 were not, given that they were placed in 1930, borrowed from Confederate Memorial Literary Society.)

Generally, Confederate monuments and markers have come in several distinctive waves of placement and public interaction, many as part of the proto-political activity of white southern women in the Ladies Memorial Association and UDC in the immediate aftermath of the war. W&L’s “Recumbent Lee” falls into the earliest wave of monuments placed by the veterans themselves. In this case, it is also a marker over a crypt created by one of the foremost sculptors of the U.S. South, Edward Valentine. The monument is arguably Valentine’s masterwork. Those who raised the funds for the monument were the living members of the high command of the Confederate army (including John Gordon, Jubal Early, and John Bell Hood). There are many concentric circles to this discussion. Many more monuments were placed during the period of legal “Jim Crow” segregation/the erection of the Lost Cause mythology/the reestablishment of conservative, white Democratic rule (lead up to 50th anniversary, also), many more during the run up to the centennial (a celebratory toned event), which corresponds to

Civil Rights movement and massive resistance, and even more placed as interpretive monuments by later groups to mark unit placement and veterans' service (some Confederate unit markers were placed by the U.S. War Dept.)—a sizable number of these were placed within the last 40 to 50 years. Many of Gettysburg's could be easily seen as celebratory, but were given for multiple purposes by state legislatures. The NPS has a very measured stance growing out of decades of worked over policy by some of the best historians in the country. Many Confederate monuments/markers were actually placed not only by veterans groups to mark battle sites, but they have even been placed by the U.S. Department to mark battle placement as well.

A site, like "Monument Avenue" in Richmond could move to abandon or rescind that NHL and Virginia Landmark designation in order to change the site (with subsequent questions of property value and preservation highlighted in the discussion), but that is something that should be open for public forum and steered by professional historians and scholars. This is a process that is ongoing in Richmond. Virginia State Landmark protections also apply to W&L, but recent statements by the Governor of Virginia, leave the state battle sites (like Sailor's Creek Battlefield State Park) somewhat in the air right now as of 8/18/17, given the "War Memorial" law and other preservation policies. The removal of a small number of monuments that are Confederate battle site markers would likely be a new flashpoint anywhere on a field even at the state park level. Our campus was also part of Union General David Hunter's raid in 1864.

In short, W&L, as a private site, perhaps the most important private NHL Civil War/Reconstruction site relevant to the national discussion of monuments, naming, and flags (even the school's motto and crest are Lee affiliated), should be dealt with with care. Other sites provide context and direction for our future programming and interpretation. Gettysburg and Antietam are probably the most important National Military Parks in the public, national site conversation. Richmond's Monument Avenue is a combination public and private site (with 250+ houses that are part of that designation, and 6 high profile monuments, part owned by state (Lee) and the rest by city (Ashe, Maury, Stuart, Jackson, and Davis). So, our decision is one of importance on both the name, which is also a cultural "artifact" of the period of Lee's presidency and of the South's national postwar rebuilding project during the Reconstruction period. (President Barack Obama recently designated a site in the low country of South Carolina for its importance to that period). This provides another argument for our name and sites continued integrity. The controversial "War Memorial" law is even more at issue in this case, but it is also a complex site for other reasons. In Charlottesville, the case will almost certainly turn on how a judge interprets the limits of that section of code.

What concerns me most is the erosion of the landscape both cultural and physical for civil debate and discourse to engage with America's rich, but so often troubled, history. We should teach about how vile hate groups are, including the most recent generation of the KKK and neo-Nazi organizations. Indeed, we should shout it from the rafters. We should not allow these individuals to govern our collective memory. We've chosen as a people to protect some sites in perpetuity despite their difficult pasts and ugly histories,

even Confederate history. Indeed, many should be protected directly because of that horrible history to teach our children—“never again.”

***Proposal:

W&L should embrace the opportunity to lead on this public history issue both for its students and alumni. The university should *develop a direct partnership with the National Park Service* for training and interpretation of this unique set of sites. The interpretation would then be in line with the latest scholarly and public history interpretation of the war and its legacy now and in the future. (VMI may also want to consider this partnership, but it is a state site with the relevant considerations involved). W&L has many alumni placed in the NPS and at Museum sites. It is now time to call them. I suggest developing a partnership with Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania NMP, which has perhaps the finest interpretive training staff in the system. Also, a direct alliance with the American Civil War Museum in Richmond on interpretation matters. *These would lead W&L to a virtually unique partnership in America, a private/public partnership in interpretation at a liberal arts university.* This should come hand-in-hand with the establishment of the Civil War Research Center I proposed for similar pedagogical reasons several years ago, also a minor program in Public History. That full proposal is already with top administrators, but I am happy to provide it again.

For the foreseeable future, I would also advise that the gates to “Recumbent Lee” remained locked and chained. The university may also want to strongly consider shuttering the Lee Chapel on Lee-Jackson weekend this current academic year.