

## Peerless Rockville's statement for July 20, 2015, Mayor and Council work session on the Confederate Soldier Statue

Rockville's Confederate statue was dedicated June 3, 1913 – nearly 50 years after the Civil War -as a monument to “the heroes of Montgomery County, Maryland.” This memorial was part of a cultural movement to promote reconciliation between North and South during the decades after the Civil War. As in Rockville, the Washington area contains many monuments to both the Union and the Confederacy, including those located in local cemeteries and other public spaces.

It is true that the monument was sponsored by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Ridgely Brown Camp of the United Confederate Veterans to honor Montgomery County soldiers who fought for the Confederacy, that it was dedicated on Jefferson Davis' birthday, that it faces southward in symbolic defiance to the Union, and that no similar memorial to a Union soldier stands on the site. There is no interpretive information associated with the statue, allowing viewers to assign their own meaning. We understand that for some, that meaning may be a hurtful endorsement of the Confederate cause, including pernicious racial views that persisted after the Civil War.

The Confederate Soldier Statue is a local example of a custom designed “common soldier” monument, proudly erected in the City of Rockville by the citizens of this County more than 100 years ago. And as such, it is an important vestige of our City and County history and a unique historical artifact of its time. It is representative of the prevailing beliefs, values, culture, art and artisanship of those that designed, sponsored, crafted, erected and celebrated it. Although the values of the citizens of the County today differ in a great many ways from those of the earlier generation, a rush to remove the monument and erase the sentiments of the City's past citizenry does a great disservice to all current and future residents. History does not exist to make us feel comfortable in the present or proud of all parts of our past, and erasing those memories, instead of allowing them to inform and educate, is a mistake.

Unlike the Confederate flags that have been recently removed from state capitals, this monument does not exist to symbolize allegiance to the ideals of the Confederate States. Its presence on the east lawn of the Red Brick Courthouse does not tell the story of what is held dear or believed by the citizens of today, but rather those of an important and transformative period in our Nation's history. A time when the people of this Nation, the State of Maryland and Montgomery County were recovering from the devastation brought on by the Civil War, Slavery and Reconstruction. As stated in the Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties summary, the Statue's dedication “coincided with a political trend toward nationalism and patriotism” when “progress required compromise and unity.”

Today, in light of racially charged events throughout the Nation and the recent tragedy in Charleston, South Carolina we find ourselves once again at a time that requires compromise and unity. While a timely and well-deserved initiative to remove Confederate battle flags from public buildings is celebrated, Peerless Rockville believes the current rush to remove permanent installations of commemorative art to be a more serious and concerning measure, which amounts to censorship of our cultural history.

It sets a dangerous precedent to remove or banish long-standing historical artifacts, objects that were created in a very different cultural context but are judged on the basis of contemporary standards and political climate. Destroying or erasing historical artifacts pretends that the past does not exist or can somehow be changed to better suit our current sentiments.

In modern times, Confederate memorials have often sparked controversy as outmoded emblems of bigotry while others uphold them as symbols of regional heritage. These controversies demonstrate the on-going legacy of the Civil War and offer opportunities for continuing public dialogue, deepening our historical understanding and adding interpretation to sites to convey a richer and more complete picture of the people, and events of this monumental period in our City's history.

Rather than remove this historical artifact the County can use it as a powerful tool to educate current and future generations in a way that will foster unity. New art could draw on, interpret, and challenge the past in new and inventive ways, such as commemorating the mistreatment suffered by Montgomery County's 5,000 enslaved African-Americans. As a familiar and established feature of the cultural landscape, the Confederate memorial can continue to accumulate a broad range of meanings; it can provide a forum for public education and a setting for private and collective reflection.

Peerless Rockville has received overwhelming support for the preservation of the monument in its current location. Today we implore the City to call on the Montgomery County Council and the County Executive to undertake a thoughtful and deliberate process when it considers the removal of the Confederate statue. This must include input from the public for whom this monument was intended. The citizens of Rockville and the residents of Montgomery County must be given the opportunity to have their voices heard through a transparent and respectful democratic process. We further ask the City of Rockville to defend the right of its Historic District Commission, which must be consulted in any change to the Courthouse Square Historic District in which the Confederate monument stands.