**Episode 1—Lee Park**

[narrated by EricaJoy Oliverio]

[theme music: repetitive, dramatic keyboard music]

Monument. Noun. A memorial structure erected in remembrance of a person or event.

Put simply—a space that tells a story.

But what story? *Whose* story?

What mentality do monuments reflect and project?

[music fades]

Welcome to Monumentality. I’m your host, EricaJoy Oliverio, and, today, I’m going to tell you a story about the Civil War—or rather how people remember the Civil War.

The Civil War is a touchy topic for some, and I’m not here to tell you what to think. Rather, I’m here to offer a few facts regarding a very specific testament to the Civil War -- to lead an investigation, if you will. It is up to *you* to think about the implications of this tale.

[Musical break: warm piano music]

There is, in the heart of the Commonwealth of Virginia, nestled between the Rivanna River and the Blue Ridge Mountains, a small city called Charlottesville. It’s a historic city, home to former U.S. Presidents Jefferson and Monroe. An academic city, home to the University of Virginia. A tourist destination for weddings and weekend getaways.

And for the creators of Monumentality, Charlottesville is home.

But *home* is not as idyllic as the postcards and tourist pamphlets imply.

Centered between the capital of the United States and the previous capital of the Confederacy, Charlottesville is a city with a diverse group of citizens and beliefs. While African Americans constitute 52% of the population here, there is still a large amount of citizens who are followers of the Lost Cause Myth.

[Musical break: a civil war song from Gone with the Wind]

If you’re familiar with the 1939 film *Gone With the Wind*, you already know what the Lost Cause is, but for those who don’t, here’s the gist. After the Civil War ended, the Southern part of the U.S. was struggling with understanding their identity.

Poor white men especially felt this loss as a huge hit to their pride when they were already systematically oppressed in American society. In order to cope with their guilt and defeat, Southerners decided to focus on the good things about the South: Southern Belles, brave Confederate soldiers, and of course, the hard-working, happy black slave. These ideas spread and created the concept that slavery was *not* a main component in the Civil War.

Instead, the myth suggests that the South was fighting for Southern values and that slaves were house-workers who loved their masters more than themselves.

This is historically untrue; slavery was a big reason for the secession of the South and slaves were *not* working for pleasure. But blockbuster movies like *Gone With the Wind* perpetuated this myth, and you can still see the effects of it today--in every confederate flag, in every plantation still standing, and in every statue honoring a Confederate general.

Which brings us to our story.

[Musical break: fiddle music]

In Downtown Charlottesville, there is a park. It’s a small but popular space used for a variety of events from picnics to parades. At its center stands a large statue, erected in 1924, of a man seated proudly on a trotting horse. The man is Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

Within the past few years, this statue has become the center of a storm of controversy within the city of Charlottesville. Citizen reactions to the statue have varied wildly—the words Black Lives Matter spray painted onto the statue’s concrete base one day, the statue surrounded by a crowd of Confederate flags the next.

[Musical break: piano]

These are voices from the Charlottesville community, recorded during a Charlottesville City Council meeting. So some things might be a little difficult to hear. [each quote is from a different person who attended and spoke at the city council meeting]

“I support the statues of Lee and Jackson remaining in my hometown because they are historical works of art.”

“Now, more than ever, is the time to take bold action. To say that we remember and stand with the 52%.

“It’s time for the commission to change your vote. You’ve heard it time and again that the statues make public space unwelcoming at best for many Charlottesville residents, myself among them.

“If we are not ready to give our black heroes equal representation, then we are still bowing before the altar of white supremacy.”

“This is a progressive town being held down by these relics of white supremacy.”

Recently, Charlottesville citizens started a petition to remove the Confederate statue from the park, but their efforts have been met by riots and resistance.

As you’ve heard, the townspeople are divided. Everyone has an opinion, and while some people make similar points, no two arguments are exactly the same. Some wish to keep the monument in the name of art and preservation while others long to see the monument removed, citing racist motivations.

“Please, please, leave these heroes in the spots they have lived for years and years. I hope they will live their forever. Please keep them here. Thank you.”

“Any interest or intention to destroy the statues of General Lee and General Jackson defy reason or knowledge as these great men are appreciated for their legacy. And I wonder how many people here have actually studied the civil war--have studied the civil war in Charlottesville. And have read biographies of Robert E. Lee. And if you haven’t, then it seems to me that we should do that before we have this conversation.”

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So why are opinions so radically diverse on the subject? The reason lies in memory and modern politics.

Meet Gary Gallagher. He’s the Director of the John L. Nau III Center for Civil War History at the University of Virginia and a Professor in the History of the American Civil War. He’s also an expert in memory. So what is memory?

Gallagher: “Well I think memory is the way that people relate to the past, and it’s usually a process where what they remember might not necessarily align very well with what actually happened. [. . . ] Here’s where memory is so tricky because if you, if your memory tells you this is pertinent, that’s what you act on. You don’t act on whether it’s really accurate or not. It’s what you perceive to have been the truth, and that’s what memory is: it’s the perception of the past.”

So memory is personal. It’s not just history -- but how we interact with it. Which means Lee Park and its Confederate statue are important because of how people *remember* the Civil War. But there’s more to it than that, according to Gallagher.

Gallagher: “I think a lot of people in Charlottesville who walk by Lee Park didn’t have any idea whose statue that was. But I think there are people on both sides of the argument who use it as a way into issues they’re concerned about now, and once you get it out there and start talking about it, it becomes a flashpoint. [. . . ] Wherever you put a monument makes memory spatial, and its influence can extend beyond the actual space as the statue in Lee Park has, but Lee Park is ground zero for that memory.”

So monuments act as segue ways into a history that speaks to the present. People can point to the Lee Statue and discuss topics such as racism or the Lost Cause -- and other people will join in, regardless of their personal history with the monument in question.

Let’s take another listen to that City Council Meeting, and hear what the citizens of Charlottesville have to say -- and what they remember.

[each quote is from a different person who attended and spoke at the city council meeting]

“The Lee statue in Lee park is a concrete example of the elephant in the room. That elephant is the polite, shocked, or indifferent silence that too many demonstrate when confronted with racist acts. The statue is an act of silent coercion. It is physically too large to contextualize with monuments of a similar size or proportion. In addition, it’s size and proportion is designed to generate only one response. It forces those who stand at its base to look up. Monuments are public physical reminders of history which represent our values. We don’t have monuments to the British general Cornwallis and his so-called Loyalist soldiers at Yorktown Virginia for a reason. Rather, at Yorktown we have a victory monument that celebrates the successful fight of the continental army for the United States’ independence. This is as it should be.”

“My definition of monuments is that they are designed to impose themselves on the public space and to enshrine a shared ethos. This is their extraordinary power. When this ethos is good, such as the Lincoln monument in DC, it can embody the aspirations of liberty and equality that we all hold dear. But these monuments represent an era of division and racial inequality. There is no level of recontextualization that can alter the fact that these monuments are intended to celebrate this era of injustice.”

“Has anyone asked what it would mean to African Americans if that statue in Lee park would be removed? Would it mean that they’d feel safer? Would it mean that someone cared about what they went through? Would it mean that they knew the city could put the statue somewhere else out of respect for them? I just have one final question for the people on this commission. I just want you to really ask yourself: Have you done all that you can—really, all that you can—to respect what the African American people went through? Because if not, then maybe there needs to be more thought process of what should happen to the Stonewall statue.”

[musical interlude: somber fiddle music]

On February 6, 2017, the Charlottesville City Council voted 3-2 to relocate the statue of Lee and rename Lee Park. Within a few weeks, the city was slapped with a lawsuit. The lawsuit claims that the removal of the statue and the renaming of the park violates Virginia state code. But even without the lawsuit, the Council would still have to find a way to raise $300,000 to finance the removal of the statue.

[light piano music in the background]

Even as we’re editing this podcast, this story is changing. On April 17th the council voted again--this time to sell the statue via a process called a “request for bid”. But, on May 2nd, a judge ruled in the public’s interest that Lee’s statue cannot be moved for a period of six months.

It’s a story that doesn’t seem to have an ending. Although it’s unclear what Charlottesville’s future with this statue is, our city is not the only one engaging with questions of what it means to memorialize historical figures. In September, Alexandria, another Virginia city, voted to change the name of Jefferson Davis Highway, which was named for the President of the Confederacy.

And, in 2015, after intense protest and discussion, a statue of Davis was removed from the campus of University of Texas at Austin. But recently, that same statue was moved back to the campus with a new message that declares its status as an educational exhibit rather than a point of honor.

Maybe Charlottesville could learn something from Austin. And maybe we already have. In an interesting turn of events, the Council recently came to the *unanimous* decision to rename Lee Park through a city-wide name contest.

[musical interlude: slightly upbeat fiddle music]

With so many emotions surrounding this issue, there is no clear path forward, but the questions being raised are important. What is the place of monuments in understanding history? What role do *we* play in facing our nation’s past?

Engaging with these questions of history is more critical than ever, especially in an increasingly polarized country, under a President whose campaign slogan of “Make America Great Again” romanticizes the America of the past.

Understanding the truth of our history helps us move forward responsibly, aiming to find a balance between respecting our country’s past and acknowledging the pain caused by these monumental men.

[theme music returns]

Next week on Monumentality, we’ll focus on a place even closer to home for us-- a place that isn’t going to be removed or relocated anytime soon: The University of Virginia’s Academical Village and the Lawn.

Thank you to Professor Ceraso for providing us with audio from the City Council Meeting and to Professor Gallagher for taking the time to be interviewed for this podcast.

[theme music fades out]