Monuments, Memorials, & Memory

How Should We Remember the Past in Alabama?

[Draft Issue Guide]
Introduction

On the morning of June 24, 2015, state employees removed flags related to the Confederate States of America from the Capitol grounds in Montgomery, Alabama on the order of Governor Robert Bentley. The flags came down one week after the racially-motivated murder of pastor and parishioners at Emanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Governor Bentley told a reporter later that day that the Charleston tragedy prompted his order, and the flags were a distraction to more pressing issues facing the state. Sons of Confederate Veterans officer Mike Williams disagreed. Racism and the misuse of historical symbols is the problem, he said, not the flags themselves:

“If you don’t change people’s hearts, changing a flag won’t do anything toward racism.” ¹

Discussions related to Confederate monuments, memorials, holidays, and symbols are taking place in Alabama and across the nation, and the issue raises a deeper question:

How should individuals and communities understand and remember the past?

The issue is complicated and controversial, and conversations are often deeply personal. What one person finds offensive, another person might find meaningful. Perspective matters, and we gain a better understanding of another’s perspective when we talk open and honestly with each other about what we value.

This guide is written for a group to use in a deliberative forum facilitated by a neutral moderator. The guide includes three approaches to the issue, but they are meant to prompt, not limit, discussion.

We hope everyone who attends a forum finds a voice that matches their own, and if forum participants hold diverse perspectives, the deliberation will be rich and meaningful.

The purpose of the forum is not to change your mind about how you feel about the issue.

Rather, we hope that by the end of the forum you understand better why someone who has a different perspective sees the issue that way. If we listen closely enough, we might find some common ground for action.

At the very least, we will have exercised our civic muscles, not a bad use of our time.
Approach One

Protect and Preserve the Past

In 2017, the Alabama Legislature passed the Alabama Memorial Preservation Act, which prohibits the destruction or alteration of public monuments older than forty years.

Local communities seeking changes to an affected monument can apply for a waiver from a standing committee. Supporters of the bill sought to protect monuments and memorials from those who might want to remove them. As the bill’s sponsor, Senator Gerald Allen wrote:

“In order to understand our complete history and where we are today, we have to tell it as it happened.”

The monuments are not the problem, supporters of this approach say. People with bad intentions are the problem, and we should deal with them and their motivations. We can’t change the past, so we must work for the future.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Some Things We Might Do:</th>
<th>Even If:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Support the Alabama Memorial Preservation Act...</td>
<td>...the law prevents local communities from deciding the fate of their local monuments.</td>
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<td>2. Condemn the misappropriation of historical symbols as tools of hate and violence...</td>
<td>...the symbols themselves are offensive to many people.</td>
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<td>3. Increase monitoring of monuments and punishments for individuals who deface or destroy them...</td>
<td>...this means diverting resources from other law enforcement priorities.</td>
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<td>4. Encourage family and regional heritage initiatives through private rather than public contributions...</td>
<td>...people misunderstand the motivations.</td>
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Approach Two

Remember the Past More Completely

Others in the state are concerned that protecting monuments and memorials unfairly over-represents one part of society over another. Public spaces should reflect the entire community’s history, not just those who were in power when buildings were named or monuments placed.

Monuments representing a common Confederate soldier might be a reminder of service to country for some, but to others, the symbol represents the culture of white supremacy and time period in which it was placed.

Those who want to remember the past more completely don’t necessarily agree on how we should do this, but the following actions represent their concerns.

Some Things We Might Do:

1. Move controversial monuments from public spaces to more historically appropriate spaces like museums and cemeteries...

2. Rename buildings and public holidays to honor people who reflect current values...

3. Seek to contextualize monuments and memorials to acknowledge everyone’s history...

4. Add additional monuments to the public square to commemorate multiple perspectives and experiences of history...

Even If:

...fewer people encounter and learn from them.

...some people may feel this is whitewashing history.

...we may never completely agree on an interpretation of the past.

...this effort creates additional tension within the community.
Approach Three

Reconcile Ourselves to the Past and Each Other

Discussion and action on how we remember history is important, but this is only a symptom of a deeper problem: we have not dealt with the history and legacy of racism that still exists in the United States.

Slavery’s legacy can be found throughout our society, whether in deeply held myths of racial inferiority or inequalities in education or the criminal justice system.

These realities are not pleasant, but if we fail to deal with them in a substantive way, we will continue to perpetuate the violence we detest.

Advocates of this approach don’t necessarily ignore the issue of monuments and memorials, but they suggest actions that emphasize justice, such as the actions listed below.

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<th>Some Things We Might Do:</th>
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<td>1. Create a group or establish a commission to promote racial reconciliation...</td>
<td>...there are no immediate tangible results.</td>
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<td>2. Acknowledge untold aspects of our past in thoughtful and appropriate ways...</td>
<td>...some people will discount these efforts as simply “political correctness.”</td>
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<td>3. Advocate for laws that address issues of systemic inequalities...</td>
<td>...this is perceived as preferential treatment for certain groups.</td>
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<td>4. Host formal and informal opportunities for community members to encounter different perspectives...</td>
<td>...this makes some people feel uncomfortable.</td>
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If you are interested in learning more about how you can engage your community around the issues discussed in this guide, please contact Cristin Brawner, Executive Director of the David Mathews Center for Civic Life at cfoster@mathewscenter.org or 205-665-9005.