

# The past that's still with us

**Our view:** Mayor is right to proceed cautiously on city's Confederate monuments

The killing last month of nine black parishioners at a church in Charleston, S.C., allegedly by a young white gunman who posted pictures of himself online with a Confederate battle flag, prompted a national debate over the meaning of that symbol today. Some whites view the flag as an expression of pride in their Southern heritage, but many African-Americans view it as a glorification of slavery, racial bigotry and hatred. Last week, the divisive controversy surrounding the flag surfaced in Baltimore when some community leaders called on the city to rid itself of all symbols of the Confederacy, including century-old sculptures, monuments and memorials that were erected only a few decades after the Civil War.

It's one thing to call for removing the Confederate flag from public buildings, as South Carolina and other states are considering doing, or to cease depicting it on state license plates, as Gov. Larry Hogan says he wants to do in Maryland. Whatever significance the battle flag originally had for the soldiers who fought under it during the Civil War, that meaning was hijacked by white supremacists and demagogues during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s, when it became a symbol of violent resistance to integration and black voting rights in the aftermath of the 1954 Brown decision.

The meaning of the Confederate battle flag can no more be separated from that shameful chapter in the nation's history than the swastika can be divorced from the evil reign of Hitler's Third Reich. It is a symbol not of the honorable legacy of men who fought and died for what they believed in 150 years ago but rather of the murder and mayhem of a more recent vintage inflicted on African-Americans to deprive them of their rights. States have no business endorsing that cruel purpose on public buildings or license plates.

The statues of Confederate generals and the memorials to the soldiers they led into battle, however, fall into a different category, regardless of what we think today of the cause they fought for. It's only incidental that some of them may also be works of art. What matters is that they recognize events and individuals in our history that, for better or worse, have helped shape who we are today, and their existence here reflects important truths about where Baltimore stood during the Civil War and afterward.

That is why Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake was right to call for a task force last week to study how the city should deal with its Confederate memorials and monuments. Some were erected by family members of the dead who still remembered the war, when thousands of Marylanders fought and died on both sides of the conflict and Baltimore City itself was divided between ardently pro-Union and pro-Confederate factions. No public funds were used to construct those memorials, which were commissioned by



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Someone recently wrote "Black Lives Matter" on the base of Baltimore's Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monument.

private individuals. We need to find a way to allow them to honor their dead and at the same time reconcile what those sites meant to them with the meanings they hold for us today.

Some of the sites may be inappropriate for the locations where they stand, and moving them might allow them to be seen and interpreted in their broader historical context. Others might simply be left in place with additional information provided about their subjects. Here is where modern technology such as audio tours and cellphone apps could offer visitors a more nuanced understanding of what they are looking at and why it is important.

**(Baltimore County Executive Kevin Kamenetz's proposal to rename Robert E. Lee Park falls into a different category. The park has no connection to the Civil War other than its name, and it only got that so that a long-dead city recreation booster could funnel money from his aunt's estate to its construction without flagrantly violating the terms of her will. Changing the name to something that reflects the park's current identity rather than a historical quirk is an easy call.)**

The novelist William Faulkner famously wrote that "the past is never dead. It's not even past." Faulkner's great subject was the tragic racial history of his native South and the struggle both to accept the past's powerful hold over us and to continue toward the future. We still feel the reverberations of the catastrophic conflict that tore the country apart a century and a half ago. It continues to inform our present and shape our future as surely as the ripples from a stone cast in the middle of a river eventually touch its banks far downstream. We can't escape the past merely by toppling statues or bulldozing monuments. Honoring our history also means learning to live with it as best we can.