

To: Commission for Historical Statues in the United States Capitol
From: Matt Gottlieb
Date: 13 July 2020
Re: Research and historical analysis on Statuary Hall

Three-sentence summary:

The General Assembly passed funding for the Robert E. Lee and George Washington statues in 1903. Pushback from Union veterans' groups delayed the sculptures' installation until 1909. The controversy continued into the following year, and a formal ceremony welcoming the works of art finally took place in 1934.

Summary and analysis:

The General Assembly's 1903 funding of a Robert E. Lee statue for Statuary Hall angered Northern Union veterans so much that the legislature also authorized the current George Washington sculpture as an inducement, creating a package deal. Rejecting Lee, controversially depicted in his Confederate uniform, would therefore mean rejecting Washington as well. Even though each state held the right to select its own representatives for the Hall, the Lee-Washington project still went dormant for about four years in hopes that the public reception would improve over time. The statues finally arrived in 1909, but Lee remained so toxic in some quarters that the situation forced an official opinion from the attorney general and a high-profile vote at the 1910 Grand Army of the Republic convention. The official acceptance ceremony took place in 1934 at the U.S. Capitol's rotunda.

The drive for the Lee statue largely avoided overt racist language, but Jim Crow lurked in the background. The idea for the sculpture stemmed from a 1902 speech by former Union cavalry officer Charles Francis Adams II who emerged later in life as an advocate for white supremacy. U.S. Senator John Warwick Daniel of Virginia put Adams's idea into action. He wrote up legislation for funding the monument. He also chaired the Committee on the Elective Franchise at the state constitutional Convention of 1901–1902, which disenfranchised virtually all of Virginia's African Americans. Daniel served as the floor leader for the draconian measures for stripping away voting rights. The African American newspaper the *Richmond Planet* understood the connection between the Lee Statue and eliminating Reconstruction's gains, but it and other African Americans lacked the political weight of Union veterans' groups.

The creation of the Lee and Washington statues, with overt language portraying the two as nearly identical men, fell within the idea of post-Civil War reconciliation: Confederate memorial groups minimizing or ignoring the causes of the war, and both sides emphasizing mutual valor. National unity, at least among whites, was the goal. Yet even with this relatively low bar, the Lee statue proved too much for thousands of Americans.

Contents

- History of the Lee and Washington statues
- A list of experts to consult
- Online suggestions for further reading

History of Virginia's Statues

Creation of Statuary Hall and the first Washington sculpture

Congress authorized the National Statuary Hall in 1864. The idea allowed each state to send two monuments honoring distinguished citizens for display in the old House of Representatives chamber.¹ Some early sculptures, however, also came from the federal government. These initial representations included one of Washington, likely installed circa 1868.² The statue likely was a slapdash work since in 1891 the prominent journalist Walter Wellman decried the artwork as “weazened, badly organized, physically weak, and spiritually flat” and “in a sad state of dilapidation.” The coat of paint over it flaked badly, leaving the impression that the first president’s skin was peeling.³ The statue likely received some upkeep, since direct criticism appears limited over the next decade. Still, when Virginia sought a Lee sculpture, observers noted the raggedy looking plaster of Washington.⁴

Charles Francis Adams II proposes a Lee statue

Talk of a Lee monument in Statuary Hall dated to the 1880s, but it crystallized with a 1902 speech by former Union cavalry officer Charles Francis Adams II of the

¹ “About the National Statuary Hall Collection,” Architect of the Capitol.

² Statues of Lincoln and Hamilton were unveiled that year (29 April Rock Island, Ill., *Daily Argus*; 28 Nov. *Wheeling Daily Register*). A 20 Feb. 1905 letter to the *Washington Post* cited a government document stating that the Washington sculpture was purchased in 1870 for \$2,000, but that source specified an equestrian statue of the general rather than a copy of Houdon. The 6 Sept. 1885 *Savannah Morning News* included a survey of Statuary Hall, noting federally funding depictions of Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

³ This nationally syndicated work appeared in the 22 Aug. Lincoln, Neb. *Capital City Courier* and the Jackson (Mich.) *Citizen Patriot*, among others.

⁴ *Washington Post*, letter to the editor, 20 Feb. 1905 uses “wretched plaster.” A 21 July 1908 story on the statue situation calls it “cheap plaster.” A nationally distributed article that ran in 1909 used the term “rather shabby cast” (*Times-Dispatch*, 18 July; 4 Sept. Covington [La.] *Tammany Farmer*; 7 March 1910 Cairo [Ill.] *Bulletin*).

famed Massachusetts political family.⁵ This effort fell into a concept that scholars call reconciliation, an evolving idea that by the turn of the twentieth century involved each side's mutual admiration of the other's military prowess. Still, most Union veterans pushed back against Lost Cause followers who wished to minimize or outright remove slavery from the history of the war.⁶ Adams, a former commander of United States Colored Troops, emphasized a white supremacist version of reconciliation. He privately minimized slavery as the conflict's cause, repeatedly denounced Reconstruction and integration, and began giving speeches glorifying the Confederacy. In this approach, the rebellion's top general became in the words of one scholar, Adams's "tragic hero."⁷ One of these talks, the 1902 "Shall Cromwell Have a Statue?", advocated for a Lee memorial in Washington. The New Englander conceded that his subject was a traitor, at least technically, but then so in his estimation were George Washington, Oliver Cromwell, and other lauded rebels. Adams gave an overly romanticized account of Lee's postwar life and suggested that an equestrian statue of him would help heal sectional differences. The speaker did not mention race in this instance, but in other talks, he blasted anything approaching civil rights or racial equality.⁸

⁵ "Lee Returns to the Capitol: A Case Study in Reconciliation and Its Limits," *Reconciliation after Civil Wars: A Global Perspective*.

⁶ Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation*, 6–10.

⁷ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, 359–360.

⁸ For example, when Adams gave a speech at Washington and Lee University for the centennial of Lee's birth, he blamed the Civil War and the desire for racial equality on the "female and sentimentalist portrayal" of the enslaved in Harriet Beecher Stowe's book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Virginia acts

As Adams delivered his speech in favor of Lee's statue, Virginia's U.S. Senator John Warwick Daniel finished up his work at the state constitutional Convention of 1901–1902. The Confederate veteran who once said “I am a Democrat because I am a white man and a Virginian” helped spearhead the disfranchisement of virtually all of Virginia's African Americans and large numbers of whites as well. Daniel chaired the Committee on the Elective Franchise, though he initially sought a less-draconian way to curtail black voters. When the issue stalled, he served as the floor leader for the more aggressive approach.⁹ Daniel began preparing the drive for a Lee monument after the convention disbanded. He quietly received the go-ahead from the architect of the capitol and the secretary of state, contacted the sculptor Edward V. Valentine, and wrote the legislation for his nephew, state Senator Don P. Halsey, to submit in the upcoming session of the General Assembly.¹⁰

Union veterans and African Americans oppose the statue

Opposition to Daniel's plans built up quickly. Halsey entered the bill on 18 January 1903.¹¹ Three days later, the state's U.S. House delegation met with Secretary of State John Hay to gauge his opinion on whether the nation would accept the statue.¹² The *Richmond Dispatch* worried about sectional tensions.¹³ By early February Union

⁹ “Disfranchisement,” *Encyclopedia Virginia*; “John Warwick Daniel,” *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*; and *Hornbook of Virginia History*, 98. Quote from “John Warwick Daniel.”

¹⁰ “Lee Returns to the Capitol.”

¹¹ *Richmond Times*, 18 Jan. 1903.

¹² 20 Jan. *Washington Times*.

¹³ 21 Jan.

veterans' groups began denouncing the idea as one that promoted a traitor.¹⁴ Their pushback continued through the spring. The *Richmond Planet*, an African American newspaper, though lacking the political clout of veterans' groups, also criticized the idea, combining it with speeches by notorious white supremacist "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman as the "acme of political folly."¹⁵ Kansas threatened to submit John Brown in response, leading one Washington paper to wonder if the war was even over.¹⁶ While opposition among Northern groups was far from universal—a number of high profile veterans saw it as a conciliatory measure, and the Pennsylvania legislature considered providing funds for a Lee statue at Gettysburg¹⁷—there was enough of it for Virginia to adopt a new strategy.

Washington Meets Lee

By early March, Virginians taken aback by the hostile reception began adjusting their plans by also adding a new bronze cast of Jean-Antoine Houdouin's statue of George Washington to replace the plaster one on display.¹⁸ One historian assessed this as the state brandishing "a carrot and a stick."¹⁹ The idea of combining Washington and Lee was not new. The Confederate general had modeled himself on the first president. As mentioned earlier, Adams used this formulation when promoting a Lee statue. The

¹⁴ The earliest I saw came from the *Washington Times*, 4 Feb. and the *Washington Evening Star*, 5 Feb.

¹⁵ 21 March 1903.

¹⁶ *Washington Times*, 8 March 1903.

¹⁷ *Washington Times*, 20 Jan. 1903; Don P. Halsey, speech "On the Bill to Provide a Statue of Robert Edward Lee to be Placed in Statuary Hall in the Capitol at Washington, Delivered in the Senate of Virginia, February 6, 1903," 7–8, 10–13.

¹⁸ The earliest version of this package deal came from former Governor, Confederate General, and U.S. general in the Spanish-American War Fitzhugh Lee in the 14 March 1903 *Washington Times*.

¹⁹ "Lee Returns to the Capitol."

dedication of Monument Avenue's 1890 Lee memorial included portraits of the two men. Halsey, when advocating for the project in the Senate of Virginia, quoted an author who compared the pair to the Greek mythological twins Castor and Pollux.²⁰ At least one other speaker promoted the Washington and Lee connection.²¹ The General Assembly ultimately enacted a bill that spent \$10,000 on Valentine's Lee work and \$7,000 on a new Washington sculpture, though Governor Andrew Jackson Montague allowed the bill to become law without his signature.²² Even so, the continued protests of United States Army veterans, further intensified in October by an announcement that Valentine would depict Lee in a Confederate uniform, forced the project into dormancy. The endeavor revived late in 1907,²³ and General Assembly members tasked with overseeing the Lee statue inspected the completed artwork in July 1908.²⁴

Turbulent installation

The Lee and Washington statues finally arrived at the Capitol in the summer of 1909. A nationally distributed newspaper article anticipated their installation by proclaiming the divisions between North and South "obliterated,"²⁵ but the opposition continued. The *Richmond Planet* lamented that new statue of Lee along with the rollback

²⁰ "Halsey, 16.

²¹ "All Confederate soldiers will rejoice at the suggestion of Virginia's senior Senator that the statue of Robert E. Lee be placed in the Hall of Statuary at Washington as the counterpoint of George Washington," *Richmond Times*, 21 Jan. 1903.

²² *Washington Evening Star*, 28 April; *Washington Times*, 19 April; *Times-Dispatch*, 18 July. Just to cover the bases, the Assembly renewed funding each year until completion, though at different levels. This figure is not the final one.

²³ "Lee Returns to the Capitol;" letter to the editor, *Washington Times*, 18 May, 18 October 1903; *Times-Dispatch*, 21 Jan. 1906, 21 Nov. 1907; 18 July 1909;

²⁴ *Washington Evening Star*, 21 July 1908; *Times Dispatch*, 22 July 1908.

²⁵ The earliest version I saw came in the 18 July 1909 *Times-Dispatch*, but I see it also in the 4 Sept. Covington (La.) *St. Tammany Farmer* and the 7 March 1910 *Cairo [Ill.] Bulletin*.

of the Reconstruction Amendments fulfilled “all the hopes of the radical, moss-back Negro-haters of the Southland.”²⁶ Planned dedications never materialized. Congress merely allowed the Lee sculpture to remain, understanding that rejecting it meant losing the Washington artwork as well. Veterans’ groups resumed their objections, remaining upset over Lee’s depiction in uniform.²⁷ A year later the continued opposition forced President William Howard Taft to consult his attorney general, who in turn specified that he could not remove a state’s artwork nor could Congress reject it. He also saw the Lee effigy as a way of ameliorating sectional tensions.²⁸ In September 1910 the largest Union army veterans’ group, the Grand Army of the Republic, voted down a resolution condemning the Lee statue. This effectively ended the matter.²⁹ A series of Confederate figures entered Statuary Hall over the following 20 years.³⁰

As with most cultural memories of the Civil War, the pro-Confederate version ultimately triumphed. In 1932 Rep. Clifton Alexander Woodrum of Roanoke announced that he had discovered to his surprise that no dedication ceremony took place for Virginia’s statues.³¹ Congress officially welcomed the Washington and Lee sculptures two years later in a ceremony in the Capitol’s rotunda. Massachusetts Senator David I.

²⁶ 4 Dec. 1909. The *Planet* also mentioned a statue of Jefferson Davis in the capitol, but this appears to reference plans for Mississippi creating a sculpture of the Confederate president. Though newspaper reports discussed this in the summer and autumn of 1909, the work was not installed until 1930.

²⁷ 28 July 1909 *Washington Evening Star*; 28 Dec. 1909 *Washington Post*; 1 Jan. 1910 *Washington Bee*; nationally distributed column by Frederic J. Haskin, January 1910.

²⁸ *Washington Post*, *Washington Times*, 1 Aug. 1910.

²⁹ *Washington Evening Star*, 18 Sept. 23 Sept. 1910; *Washington Times*, 24 Sept. 1910.

³⁰ *Washington Post*, 17 August 2017. I will note that Lee was not the first former Confederate in the Hall, but the earlier J. L. M. Curry statue depicted a man more known for his educational work than his time as the Confederate speaker of the house.

³¹ Associated Press stories via the *Washington Post*, 22, 23 Feb. 1932.

Walsh formally accepted the statues, proclaiming Lee a national hero.³² Don P. Halsey, by then a judge, lauded Washington and Lee as rebels. “If one is to be condemned for it, the other must follow.”³³ Francis P. Gaines, president of Washington and Lee University, described the men as twins.³⁴ The statues received recognition from the federal government after 31 years.

³² “Statues of George Washington and Robert E. Lee Proceedings,” 33.

³³ *Ibid*, 40.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 47.

Potential consultants in alphabetical order

- Robert Colby, Christopher Newport University, wrote the essay “Lee Returns to the Capitol: A Case Study in Reconciliation and Its Limits” in *Reconciliation after Civil Wars: Global Perspectives*. Robert.colby@cnu.edu, (757) 594-7881
- Christy Coleman, former CEO of the American Civil War Museum and current director of the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation. (757) 253-4840
- Caroline Janney, director of U.Va.’s John L. Nau III Center for Civil War History and author of two books on Civil War memorialization. cej4b@uva.edu, (434) 243-2324
- Ashleigh Lawrence-Sanders, University of Dayton, specializes in African American reaction to the Lost Cause. Email form through her faculty page: <https://udayton.edu/directory/artssciences/history/lawrence-sanders-ashleigh.php>
- Nicole Maurantonio, University of Richmond, author of *Confederate Exceptionalism: Civil War Myth and Memory in the Twenty-First Century*. nmaurant@richmond.edu.

Further reading online

Secondary sources:

- “Lee returns to the Capitol: A Case Study in Reconciliation and its Limits”:
https://www.google.com/books/edition/Reconciliation_after_Civil_Wars/3wlrDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22Lee+Returns+to+the+Capitol%22&pg=PT151&printsec=frontcover
- “How Statues of Robert E. Lee and other Confederates Got into the U.S. Capitol”:
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/08/16/how-statues-of-robert-e-lee-and-other-confederates-got-into-the-u-s-capitol/>
- “John Warwick Daniel”:
https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Daniel_John_Warwick_1842-1910
- “Robert E. Lee in Memory”:
https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Lee_Robert_E_in_Memory

Primary sources:

- “Shall Cromwell Have a Statue?”:
https://www.google.com/books/edition/Shall_Cromwell_Have_a_Statue/aL1YAAAMAAMAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22shall+cromwell+have+a+statue%22&printsec=frontcover
- “Lee’s Centennial: An Address by Charles Francis Adams”:
https://www.google.com/books/edition/Lee_s_Centennial/bt4EAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=charles+francis+adams+centennial+of+lee&printsec=frontcover
- “Report of the Lee Statue Commission”:
<https://books.google.com/books?id=IaRMAAAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA1&lpg=RA1-PA1&dq=%E2%80%9CReport+of+the+Lee+Statue+Commission%E2%80%9D&source=bl&ots=QWqyy-83kA&sig=ACfU3U2MtBh-uEyNik4DU9E852jnrrIOGA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiP3ZfJn8rqAhXzmXIEHbhSChoQ6AEwAXoECAQQAQ#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%9CReport%20of%20the%20Lee%20Statue%20Commission%E2%80%9D&f=false>
- “Statues of George Washington and Robert E. Lee Proceedings”:
https://books.google.com/books?id=OGdUAAAIAAJ&pg=RA1-PA4&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false