



J. MARION SIMS STATUE IN CENTRAL PARK

New York, New York, USA

40.792356, 73.952594



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Executive Summary

In Central Park in New York, New York, a statue of physician J. Marion Sims was raised in 1934. Sims was credited with highly impactful procedures in gynaecology; However, many of these procedures were generated by conducting surgery on enslaved Black women without anaesthesia. Local activists began calling for the statue's removal in 2006, and this conversation gained a national spotlight in 2017 as the legacy of Confederate monuments grew large in the country's mainstream consciousness following White supremacist violence. After a mayoral-commissioned review of the city's monuments, the statue was relocated to Sims' burial site in Brooklyn in 2018, and an artist was chosen to create a replacement installation in 2019. Conversations continue, though, as the statue's placement in Brooklyn and the pedestal in Central Park leaves some unsettled business and as the replacement art has been delayed by the coronavirus pandemic.

Introduction

J. Marion Sims was a prominent American physician renowned for developing techniques and tools that advanced gynaecological practice; However, many are unaware that Sims conducted his experiments on enslaved Black women without providing anaesthesia. A commemorative statue praising Sims for his 'brilliant achievements' was cast in Munich in 1892 and erected in Central Park in 1934. Although local activists and campaigners had been advocating for the statue's removal since 2006, pressure on municipal governments escalated in 2017 after a nationwide conversation regarding the removal of confederate monuments was sparked as a result of White supremacist violence and terrorism. A 2018 mayoral-commissioned review of New York City's monuments recommended that Sim's statue be relocated and an explanatory plaque be added, among other recommendations. The statue was relocated to Sim's burial site in Brooklyn in April 2018; however, the pedestal remains in Central Park, and other Sims' iconography remains in South Carolina.

Background

J. Marion Sims – Background

James (J.) Marion Sims (1813-1883) was a prominent American gynaecologist. Sims is credited with developing multiple gynaecological advancements, including the vaginal speculum (previously known as the 'Sims' speculum'), and his surgical technique for repair of vesicovaginal fistulas.¹ He also established the first women's hospital in the United States.² However, Sims' unethical and inhumane experimental practises have garnered increasing attention in recent years.

Sims ran his own medical clinic whilst regularly undertaking additional work as a plantation physician.³ From 1845 to 1849, Sims perfected his surgical correction for vesicovaginal fistulas by experimenting on enslaved Black women who were not administered (or offered) anaesthesia. Sims appealed to White men and asked them to send him their enslaved women suffering from vesicovaginal fistulas.^{4,5} It is thought that Sims experimented on up to 17 women,⁶ although he only names three women in his writings: Anarcha, Betsey and Lucy. Most women were subjected to multiple experiments, with Sims performing over 30 surgeries on Anarcha alone. Sims also wrote that the severity of the procedures did not warrant administration of anaesthesia, and a widespread myth (which is still prevalent in the current day)⁷ postulated that Black people experience pain

¹ John Allan Wyeth, "American Medical Biographies/Sims, James Marion - Wikisource, the Free Online Library," *American Medical Biographies*, 1920.

² Adam Serwer, "Why a Statue of the 'Father of Gynecology' Had to Come Down - The Atlantic," *Atlantic*, April 18, 2018.

³ Shankar Vedantam, "Interview with Vanessa Northington Gamble: Remembering Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsey: The Mothers of Modern Gynecology," *National Public Radio*, February 16, 2016.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lauren Sausser, "'Savior of Women' or Medical Monster?" *Post and Courier*, April 17, 2017.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kelly M. Hoffman et al., "Racial Bias in Pain Assessment and Treatment Recommendations, and False Beliefs about Biological Differences between Blacks and Whites," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 113, no. 16 (2016): 4296–4301.

differently than White people.⁸ However, Sims acknowledged that the enslaved women he was operating on were experiencing severe pain, writing that he thought Lucy might pass away from the severe agony she experienced during one procedure.⁹ Furthermore, Sims administered anaesthesia to the White women he performed the procedure on in the following years.

Sims went on to receive various accolades and recognitions for his contributions to the medical field; He was president of the American Medical Association and a member of the New York Academy of medicine, with various iconographic pieces placed across the country in his honour.¹⁰ However, in inscriptions accompanying these iconographic pieces (as well as in most medical textbooks), no acknowledgement is made of his experimentation on enslaved Black women or of the contributions, these women made to advancing the medical field.

Ethical Implications of Sims' Experiments

Sims' experiments have prompted discussion regarding the unethical treatment of the women on whom he operated. It has been highlighted that the women were unable to truly consent to their use as Sims' experimental subjects since they were regarded as the property of their plantation owners and not as autonomous individuals. As Professor Vanessa Northington Gamble, a physician and medical historian at The George Washington University stated in a 2016 interview with NPR:

These women were property. These women could not consent. These women also had value to the slaveholders for production and reproduction – how much work they could do in the field, how many enslaved children they could produce. And by having these fistulas, they could not continue with childbirth and also have difficulty working.¹¹

Gamble highlights how the decision to treat these women was undertaken, at least in part, due to their economic value to their owners, and not solely to improve their health and wellbeing. The women were also treated unequally to Sims' White patients, to whom he administered anaesthesia when conducting the same procedures.

Some have argued that Sims is deserving of an honourable legacy for the contributions he's made to the medical field, as vesicovaginal fistulas were far more debilitating and stigmatised before his discovery of a surgical cure.¹² However, others have highlighted how Sims' experiments contributed to long-lasting racism in both medical practice and research that is still prevalent today.¹³

Sims Iconography across the United States

⁸ Camila Domonoske, "'Father Of Gynecology,' Who Experimented On Enslaved Women, No Longer On Pedestal In NYC," National Public Radio, April 17, 2017.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Lauren Sausser, "'Savior of Women' or Medical Monster?" Post and Courier, April 17, 2017.

¹¹ Shankar Vendantam, "Interview with Vanessa Northington Gamble: Remembering Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsey: The Mothers of Modern Gynecology," National Public Radio, February 16, 2016.

¹² L. Lewis Wall, "The Medical Ethics of Dr J Marion Sims: A Fresh Look at the Historical Record," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 32, no. 6 (2006): 346–50.

¹³ Shankar Vendantam, "Interview with Vanessa Northington Gamble: Remembering Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsey: The Mothers of Modern Gynecology," National Public Radio, February 16, 2016.

Multiple iconographic pieces that memorialise Sims were placed across the U.S., including busts, paintings, statues and namesake awards. A commemorative monument of Sims, erected in 1929 by the South Carolina Medical Association, its Women's Auxiliary, and the state, currently stands in Columbia, South Carolina.¹⁴ A painting depicting Sims along with one of his enslaved patients and medical colleagues, which was commissioned in 1982, was removed from the University of Alabama's Centre for Advanced Medical Studies in 2006 after multiple complaints.¹⁵ In 2018, the Medical University of South Carolina renamed a chairmanship originally named after Sims.¹⁶

However, the most notorious Sims monument is the one discussed in this case: a commemorative statue in New York. The roughly 2.5-metre tall bronze statue depicts Sims standing, looking down on pedestrians. It was originally cast in 1892 in Munich, Germany in honour of Simis's 'medical achievements.'¹⁷ The statue was first unveiled in Bryant Park in New York City in 1894.¹⁸ At this ceremony, Physician Paul Mundé praised Sims, claiming that through his 'genius... a special branch of medical science and practice was so renovated, improved, and elevated as to create an era in medicine.'¹⁹ Sims's statue was moved from Bryant Park to Central Park in 1934 to be closer to the New York Academy of Medicine.²⁰ While the statue was in Central Park, it rested atop a concrete pedestal. In 2018, it was moved to Sims's burial site in Brooklyn, New York after local and national calls for its removal.²¹ The statue's pedestal remains in Central Park. The rest of this case highlights conversations that arose regarding Sims and the decision-making process concerning his commemorative statue in New York.

History of the Contestation

Early opposition

Viola Plummer, an 81-year-old Black activist, was one of the first recorded individuals to call attention to the statue in 2006, citing Sims' unethical experimentation on enslaved Black women.²² Plummer began highlighting Sims' unethical experiments following the publication of *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*, a book by Harriet A. Washington, which describes Sims' experimentation on enslaved Black women throughout his career. TIME magazine raised some concerns with the statue in a 1959 issue; However, the article only addressed the lack of recognition for the women's contributions to the medical field, and not the unethical practises of Sims.²³ Following early activism from Plummer, a campaign sponsored by East Harlem Preservation was initiated to advocate for the removal of the

¹⁴ One Columbia Arts and Culture, "J. Marion Sims Monument," *One Columbia Arts and Culture*, accessed December 15, 2020.

¹⁵ Washington Post, "A 19th-Century Doctor &," *Washington Post*, 2006.

¹⁶ P.R. Lockhart, "New York Removes J. Marion Sims Statue of Surgeon Who Experimented on Enslaved Women – Vox," *Vox*, April 18.

¹⁷ Melissa Acosta, "James Marion Sims Statue in New York," *Clio: Your Guide to History*, May 20, 2020.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Paul Mundé, "Dr. J Marion Sims–The Father of Modern Gynecology," *Medical Record* 46, no. 17 (1894): 514.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Nadja Sayej, "J Marion Sims: Controversial Statue Taken down but Debate Still Rages," *Guardian*, April 21, 2018.

²³ TIME: The Vault, "The Men in Her Life," *TIME: The Vault*, January 5, 1959.

statue.

In 2011, Melissa Mark-Viverito, an East Harlem councilwoman, joined the campaign and wrote a letter to the New York City Parks Department requesting that the statue of Sims be removed.²⁴ The Parks Department refused this request, and claimed that 'the city does not remove 'art' for content.'²⁵ However, in 2016, the Parks Department offered to add a plaque to the statue honouring the three women whom Sims named as his experimental subjects: the community board rejected this offer and again called for the statue's removal.²⁶ In early 2017, the campaign held an expert panel discussion of the Sims statue, which was broadcast on Manhattan Neighbourhood Network. The campaign gained national attention later in 2017, when i) the Confederate flag was removed from the South Carolina Statehouse by activist Bree Newsome following the murder of 9 Black parishioners by White supremacist Dylann Roof in June, and ii) when a White supremacist protesting the removal of a monument honouring Confederate General Robert E. Lee drove his car into a crowd of counter protesters in Virginia, killing a 32-year-old Heather Heyer in August.²⁷

Nationwide discourse in 2017 and resultant NYC mayoral-commissioned review

In response to the national controversy, New York City mayor Bill de Blasio commissioned a review of monuments, markers and city art in September 2017. The associated report described the Commission's charge:

This Commission was established to advise the Mayor on issues relating to public art, monuments, and historic markers on City-owned property. Specifically, the Commission's charge is to develop non-binding recommendations on how the City should address City-owned monuments and markers on City property, particularly those that are subject to sustained negative public reaction or may be viewed as inconsistent with the values of New York City, by which we mean a just city that prioritises diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers recognizes its role in advising the Mayor of the City of New York and offers non-binding recommendations prioritising complex, inclusive histories and opportunities for different future possibilities. The following recommendations are rooted in the Commission's shared values and respect for multiple viewpoints.²⁸

The Commission advisory board was composed of various individuals, including those with expertise in 'history, art and antiquities, public art and public space, preservation, cultural heritage, diversity and inclusion, and education.'²⁹

Decision-Making Processes

From its inception in September 2017, the Commission had 90 days to complete its report. The

²⁴ East Harlem Preservation, "Beyond Sims: The Committee to Empower Voices for Healing and Equity," *East Harlem Preservation*, accessed December 15, 2020.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Mayoral Advisory Commission, "Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments and Markers: Report to the City of New York," *City of New York*, 2018, 4.

²⁹ Ibid.

Commission held 5 public hearings and 3 meetings, at which members of the public were able to provide spoken or written testimonies. A public survey was also administered for which respondents were asked to provide their opinions of current monuments, and to make suggestions for new ones. Using data collected over the 90 days, the Commission submitted a series of recommendations to de Blasio for consideration. The Commission noted in their report that Sims' monument 'has come to represent a legacy of oppressive and abusive practises on bodies that were seen as subjugated, subordinate, and exploitable in service to his fame', and stated that New York City must take action to 'reframe this narrative'.³⁰ The Commission made 4 non-binding recommendations to the mayor regarding the Sims statue:

1. **Relocate** the statue of J. Marion Sims, without its pedestal, to another publicly accessible site;
2. **Add an explanatory plaque** on the pedestal in its current location as well as the statue in its new home that informs the public of the origins of the monument, including the legacy of non-consensual medical experimentation on women of color broadly and Black women specifically that Sims has come to symbolize; and add the names Lucy, Anarcha, and Betsey (family names unknown), the three women on whom Sims conducted his medical experiments, and their histories if possible, to honor the sacrifice of the women whose bodies were used in the name of medical and scientific advancement;
3. Partner with an appropriate organization to **program in-depth public dialogues** and symposia on the history of non-consensual medical experimentation on people of color, particularly women, based in part on the legacy of J. Marion Sims;
4. With public input, **commission new work** for the existing pedestal that reflects issues raised by Sims's legacy. For example, in collaboration with the New York City Department of Education, issue a call for names of prominent women of color in science and medicine and commission new monuments to these women, so that young people in the community and citywide will be able to see the accomplishments of their ancestors reflected in their public space.³¹

Sims' statue was ultimately relocated to Green Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, where he is buried, in 2018. There is ongoing discussion regarding the statue's relocation to Brooklyn, a neighbourhood composed largely of residents of colour who experience harm and neglect as a result of the racist legacies in medicine and research to which Sims contributed directly. The sustained presence of the statue's pedestal in Central Park is also a point of contestation, and replacement art has been discussed. In 2019, a panel chosen by the city selected an artist to create the replacement art; However, this selection was met with dissent from the community and local organisations, such as East Harlem Preservation.³² Eventually, the community's preferred artist, Vinnie Bagwell, was selected to craft the replacement art.³³ Subsequently, the coronavirus pandemic's impact in 2020 delayed the creation and installation of this replacement.³⁴

The initial response to the Sims statue was bottom-up, originating from grassroots activism with awareness existing primarily at this level for many years before the conversation became nation-wide more than 10 years later. The decision making process for any actions concerning the statue was top-down; even though members of the public and local activists were consulted

³⁰ Ibid., 21f.

³¹ Ibid., 22.

³² Helen Holmes, "Replacement of Monument Dedicated to J. Marion Sims Sparks Community Outcry," *Observer*, October 8, 2019.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Katie Honan, "Coronavirus Delays Replacement of Controversial Statue Removed From Central Park," *Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 2020.

throughout the Commission's investigation, the recommendations of the report were non-binding, and the decision to remove the statue was ultimately made by Mayor de Blasio.

Summary and Conclusions

After years of sustained grassroots activism, the Central Park statue of J. Marion Sims was relocated to his burial site in Brooklyn in 2018. New York City mayor Bill de Blasio decided to relocate the statue according to non-binding recommendations from a city-wide commissioned review of monuments, markers and city art. The review was commissioned following an escalation of the discourse surrounding confederate-era monuments, which occurred as a result of multiple instances of racially-motivated terrorism in the year prior. The review also recommended that the pedestal from the statue remain in central park, however, local activists are still campaigning for the pedestal to be relocated, as well. While an artist has been chosen to create replacement art, the implementation has been delayed by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. The decision-making process for this particular statue sheds light on how local public opinions can be respected, acknowledged and incorporated into decisions to address contested monuments. However, it also raises questions regarding how and why grassroots movements raise awareness over extended periods of time, and how this dynamic is influenced by long-standing systematic racist and sexist legacies.

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Figures

Matt Green. "I'm Just Walking", *Flickr*, 2018.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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