



STONE MOUNTAIN CONFEDERATE MEMORIAL

Georgia, United States

33.80601, -84.14601

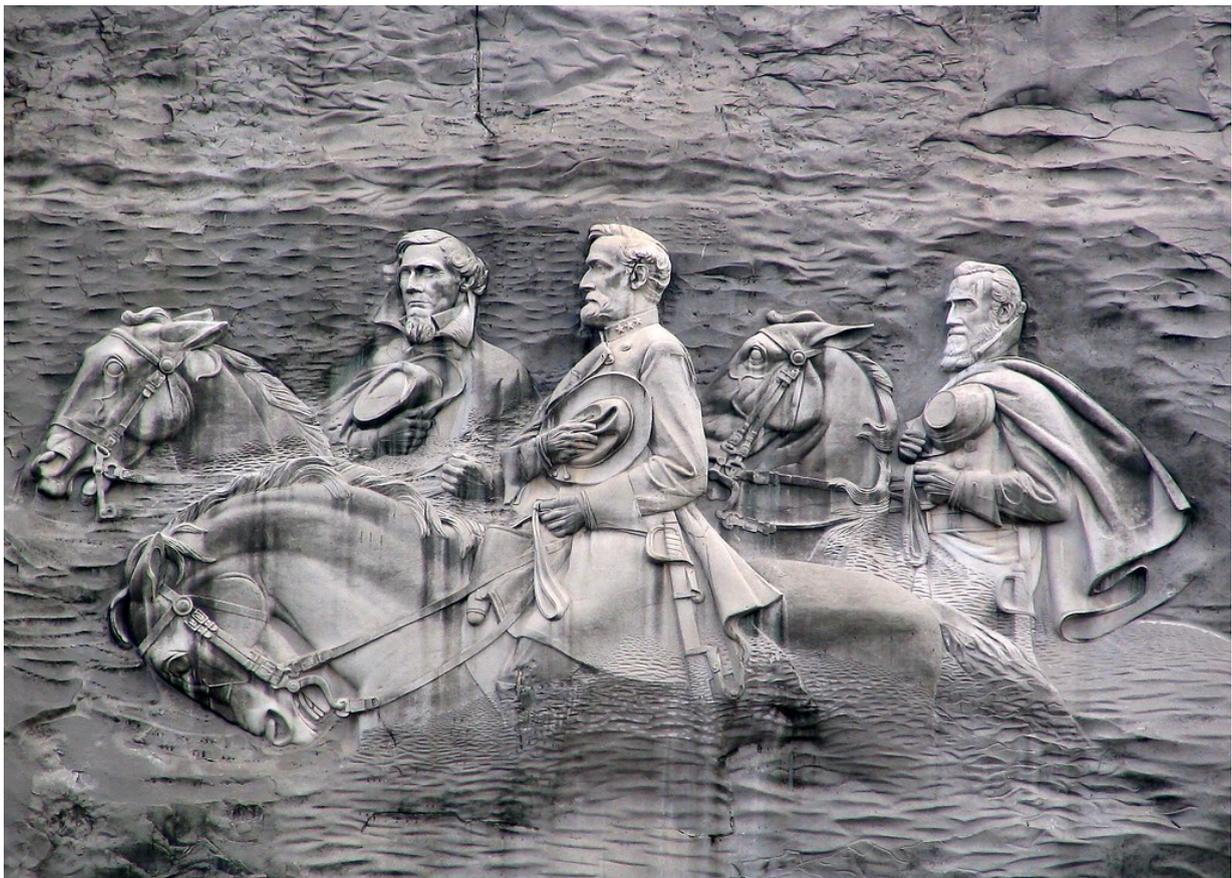


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Executive summary

The Stone Mountain Park Memorial is the largest Confederate memorial in the U.S., and the controversy around it demonstrates that the American Civil War's emancipatory purpose remains contested more than a century-and-a-half after its end. Despite multiple protests, and a gubernatorial campaign running on a platform against the monument's continued existence, Georgian state law has prevented any physical alterations to the stone face. This case is symptomatic of the broader American struggle to reconcile the legacy of the Civil War, slavery, and the Confederacy in its monuments. It explores the legal limitations which encumber decision-makers and activists in addressing these issues.

Introduction

Stone Mountain Park has been described by critics as a 'testament to the enduring legacy of White Supremacy.'¹ The carving depicts three Confederate leaders during the American Civil War on horseback: General Robert E. Lee, General Thomas 'Stonewall' Jackson and President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis. Commissioned in 1916, the monument is carved 42 feet deep and 400 feet above ground into a granite mountain, making it America's largest Confederate Memorial, and the world's largest bas-relief sculpture. The park is symbolically significant for the Ku Klux Klan (KKK),² who re-founded on top of the mountain in 1915. The monument was commissioned shortly after the Klan's re-foundation, having been funded by its members, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy to advance Southern 'Lost Cause' ideology.³ After years of delay in construction, in response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (1954) and the growth of the Civil Rights Movement, the project was restarted, opening to the public on the centennial anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's assassination, and was completed in 1971.

Modern controversy over the monument is rooted in a 2001 compromise in Georgia State House Bill 16. This Georgian state law does not permit defacement of the monument, thus attempts by activists and protestors to alter or remove the carving have been significantly encumbered.

Background

Stone Mountain Park was initially a granite quarry site which was revitalised during the Reconstruction period (1865-1877) after the American Civil War, and supplied materials to numerous Federal building projects such as the federal gold depository at Fort Knox, the Panama Canal, and the foundation of the Lincoln Memorial.⁴

From 1887, the property was privately owned by the Venable brothers, Ku Klux Klan members who allowed other KKK members to use the land, and leased it for quarrying. In 1915, inspired by D.W. Griffith's highly successful, Klan-glorifying film, *Birth of a Nation*,⁵ the KKK held a cross burning and re-foundation ceremony at Stone Mountain.⁶ Shortly after, the

¹ Lorraine Boissoneault, "What Will Happen to Stone Mountain, America's Largest Confederate Memorial?," *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 22, 2017.

² The Ku Klux Klan is a white supremacist terrorist organisation founded by Confederate veterans in 1865, initially seeking to overthrow Republican state governments in the South. After having been banned by Congress in 1871, it was re-founded on Stone Mountain in 1915, and was subsequently re-founded in the 1950s-60s during the Civil Rights Movement.

³ The 'Lost Cause' is a pseudo-historical ideology which advocates the belief that the Confederate States during the Civil War were heroic and just; that the Union was tyrannical; and that the war aim of the Confederacy was not focused on slavery.

⁴ Stone Mountain Park, "Quarry Exhibition," *Stone Mountain Park*, December 10, 2020.

⁵ The film became a nationwide success, with U.S. president Woodrow Wilson hosting a screening at the White House in 1915, describing it as 'History made with lightning.' The film contributed significantly to mythologising the KKK in America, with membership reaching as high as 4 million in 1925.

⁶ Lorraine Boissoneault, "What Will Happen to Stone Mountain, America's Largest Confederate Memorial?," *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 22, 2017.

Venables leased the face of the mountain to the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC),⁷ for a stone carving project.

The project was commissioned by UDC charter member Helen Plane, who enlisted the help of renowned sculptor and Ku Klux Klan sympathiser, Gutzon Borglum. He was initially commissioned by the UDC to sculpt a 20ft bust of Robert E. Lee, but his ideas eventually evolved into a high-relief frieze of Lee, Jefferson Davis, and Stonewall Jackson riding around the mountain. After the First World War caused a hiatus in construction, Borglum would leave the project in 1925, and go on to sculpt Mount Rushmore.

Over the course of the next 50 years, various artistic disagreements, financial, and logistical problems stalled the progress of the carving. The project was, however, renewed in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 – the landmark Supreme Court ruling which deemed segregation as unconstitutional in schools and colleges – as well as the growth of the Civil Rights Movement. At the behest of segregationist Georgia Governor Marvin Griffin – who stated ‘So long as Marvin Griffin is your governor, there will be no mixing of the races in the classrooms of Georgia’⁸ – in 1958, the Georgia State Government purchased Stone Mountain from the Stone Mountain Confederate Memorial Inc. for \$1.125 million of public funds. To historian Grace Elizabeth Hale, the motivation for doing so could not be clearer:

State politicians formed Stone Mountain Park as part of an effort to ground the white southern present in images of the southern past, a sort of neo-Confederatism, and halt nationally mandated change in the region’ (...) ‘For the governor and other supporters of the new plans, the completion of the carving would demonstrate to the rest of the nation that ‘progress’ meant not black rights, but the maintenance of white supremacy.’⁹

The carving was finally completed in 1972, being unveiled by Nixon’s vice-president Spiro Agnew.¹⁰ An early version of the park beneath the sculpture included a replica slave plantation which described slave quarters as ‘neat’ and ‘well furnished,’ insisting that slave owners voluntarily freed their slaves before ‘the war between the states.’¹¹ In the brochures, the word ‘slave’ was never used, instead referring to ‘hands’ and ‘workers.’¹² The park continues to attract up to 4 million visitors each year.¹³

History of the Contestation

⁷ The United Daughters of the Confederacy was founded in 1894 as an association of women engaging in the commemoration of Confederate soldiers, the funding of monuments to them, and the promotion of ‘Lost Cause’ ideology in history, literature, and education.

⁸ Lorraine Boissoneault, “What Will Happen to Stone Mountain, America’s Largest Confederate Memorial?,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 22, 2017.

⁹ Grace Elizabeth Hale, “Granite Stopped Time: the Stone Mountain Memorial and the Representation of White Southern Identity,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, vol.82 1998. 39.

¹⁰ Stone Mountain Park, “Quarry Exhibition,” *Stone Mountain Park*, December 10, 2020.

¹¹ Grace Elizabeth Hale, “Granite Stopped Time: the Stone Mountain Memorial and the Representation of White Southern Identity,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, vol.82 1998. 41.

¹² *Ibid.*, 41.

¹³ Jess Engebretson, “How the Birthplace of the Modern Ku Klux Klan Became the Site of America’s Largest Confederate Monument,” *KQED*, July 24, 2015.

Georgia's State House Bill 16

Modern controversy over the monument is rooted in a 2001 compromise in Georgia State House Bill 16. The bill amends the Official Law Code of Georgia to remove Confederate symbols from the Georgia State Flag and at the same time prohibits any defacement, concealment, or alteration of public memorials concerned with military service, specifically including Stone Mountain. The relevant portion of the Bill reads as follows:

(b)(1) It shall be unlawful for any person, firm, corporation, or other entity to mutilate, deface, defile, or abuse contemptuously any publicly owned monument, plaque, marker, or memorial which is dedicated to, honors, or recounts the military service of any past or present military personnel of this state, the United States of America or the several states thereof, or the Confederate States of America...A violation of this paragraph shall constitute a misdemeanor.

(2) No publicly owned monument or memorial erected, constructed, created, or maintained on the public property of this state...in honor of the military service of any past or present military personnel of this state, the United States of America...or the Confederate States of America...shall be relocated, removed, concealed, obscured or altered in any fashion.

(3)(c) Any other provision of law notwithstanding, the memorial to the heroes of the Confederate States of America graven upon the face of Stone Mountain shall never be altered, removed, concealed, or obscured in any fashion and shall be preserved and protected for all time as a tribute to the bravery and heroism of the citizens of this state who suffered and died in their cause.¹⁴

Those who support keeping the monument argue that Confederate monuments represent 'heritage not hate,' also citing the logistical and legal difficulties of removal. Those opposed to it draw attention to the aim of the Confederacy during the Civil War – the preservation of the institution of slavery, as well as the symbolic significance of the mountain to the KKK, and its use as a rallying point for white supremacist causes.

Recent protests

The terrorist attack by domestic white supremacist Dylann Roof in Charleston in 2015, and Charlottesville's 2017 violent protests over the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee reignited the discussion over removing, effacing, or contextualising the carving on Stone Mountain.

Stacey Abrams, the African American minority leader of the Georgia House of Representatives who is seeking the Democratic nomination for governor, has emphatically called for the removal of the Stone Mountain carving. Following Charlottesville, Abrams tweeted, 'We must never celebrate those who defended slavery and tried to destroy the Union...the visible image of Stone Mountain's edifice remains a blight on our state and should

¹⁴ H.R. HB16, 2001-2002 Regular Session Cong., Georgia State Legislature (2001) (enacted). To read the bill in full: <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/all>.

be removed.¹⁵ She and other leaders have said they will propose legislation to conduct a full evaluation of monuments in the state of Georgia to determine possible avenues for reform. Other lawmakers have proposed alternative solutions to dealing with controversial monuments in the state by taking a city-by-city approach.¹⁶ Republican Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle, who was also running for governor before he was knocked out in the primary by Secretary of State Kemp has denounced Abrams' calls for removal, arguing, 'Instead of dividing Georgians with inflammatory rhetoric for political gain, we should work together to add to our history, not take from it.'¹⁷

In 2015, Stone Mountain Park officials adopted a plan to add a Freedom Bell to Stone Mountain above the carving with an inscription drawn from Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech, 'Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.' However, the plan failed due to push-back from both opponents and proponents of keeping the original monument.¹⁸

In August 2018, a religious group called OneRace – which was founded in spring 2016 when civil rights activist and bishop, Garland Hunt, from Atlanta hosted a few local pastors following a small conference for young adults¹⁹ – held an event at Stone Mountain overlooking the carving with the goal of promoting racial and religious unity, peace, and reconciliation. Over 3,000 individuals, the majority under age 30, attended the event which featured civil rights leaders and activists. Jonathan Tremaine Thomas, a pastor from Ferguson Missouri acclaimed, 'Heaven is among us. The king of heaven is at hand.'²⁰ After Thomas' remarks, civil rights leader John Perkins spoke, which was subsequently followed by apologies from Christian leaders to two Jewish leaders for the history of Christian anti-Semitism. Lastly, the family members of the Charleston church shooting victims declared forgiveness for Dylann Roof. The co-director of OneRace, Billy Humphrey, stated, 'We believe we are in a divine moment. The Lord (...) wants to expose blind spots of prejudice, privilege, bitterness, and fear.'²¹ *Christianity Today International*, *Black Christian News Network*, and *National Christian Foundation* covered the event with the headline, 'How a Confederate Memorial Became a Multiracial Worship Site.'²²

On July 5, 2020, protesters belonging to a Black nationalist militia, 'Not Fucking Around Coalition,' (NFAC) descended on the site. Armed with assault rifles, the group aimed to assert their cause by making their presence felt at, a site that played a central historical role in the

¹⁵ Lorraine Boissoneault, "What Will Happen to Stone Mountain, America's Largest Confederate Memorial?" *Smithsonian Magazine*. August 22, 2017.

¹⁶ Maya T. Prabhu, H.R. HB16, 2001-2002 Regular Session Cong., Georgia State Legislature (2001) (enacted). *Politics myajc*. August 30, 2018.

¹⁷ Steve Hendrix, "Stone Mountain: The Ugly past — and Fraught Future — of the Biggest Confederate Monument," *Washington Post*, September 17, 2017

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Josh M. Sheperd, "How the Confederate Memorial of Stone Mountain Became a Multiracial Worship Site," *Christianity Today*, September 7, 2018.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

re-establishment of the KKK. Opting to hold the protest the day after the Fourth of July, when the park ordinarily stages a laser and fireworks show against the backdrop of the contentious carving, the group attempted to physically highlight how the community of Stone Mountain has demographically shifted towards becoming predominantly non-white; which, from their standpoint, adds insult to injury with regards to the continual existence of the Confederate monument.²³ John Fitzgerald Johnson, also known as Grand Master Jay and John Jay Fitzgerald Johnson, claims leadership of NFAC. He explained the demonstration was a response to a threat by the KKK to start shooting Black people from 8 pm on the Fourth of July, 2020.²⁴ The Stone Mountain Memorial Association, which operates the park, later noted that the protesters were peaceful and orderly.²⁵

While the park's Confederate iconography has long been a source of controversy, the calls for change started anew during the summer of 2020. The park closed ahead of a white supremacist rally which brought violent conflict to Stone Mountain.²⁶ After the summer protests, Stone Mountain's Confederate symbol controversy continued.²⁷ In May of 2021, the board that controls Stone Mountain State Park voted to relocate Confederate flags away from the main hiking area.²⁸ In August of 2021, the board adopted a new logo that depicts the southern face of the mountain away from the carving of the three Confederate leaders.²⁹

Decision-Making Processes

There have been robust calls to destroy or adjust the Confederate memorial at Stone Mountain. However, thus far, these demands have failed to come to fruition. Practically, it is very difficult to alter or remove the monument, being etched forty-two-foot-deep into a granite mountain whilst four hundred feet above the ground. Indeed, the only two plausible solutions are either: the potentially hazardous, exorbitant and often ineffective sandblasting of the face, as floated by Stacey Abrams in her failed gubernatorial campaign in 2018; or, the highly accommodationist approach - balancing the historical record by hoisting an equivalent African American carving of an iconic figure like Martin Luther King, or more provocatively, Atlanta-based hip-hop duo Outkast, alongside the Confederates.³⁰

However, there has been significant political gridlock on the matter at the state level in the Georgian Congress. As part of a 2001 legislative compromise to bring about the alteration of the segregation-era state flag, Georgia lawmakers passed a statute that serves to shield monuments devoted to military personnel of the U.S. and the Confederate armies, which

²³ Sha Be Allah, "NFAC holds protest at KKK gathering site in Georgia on 4th of July," *Source*, July 6, 2020.

²⁴ Martin S., Roland, "'Sending A Message' To White Supremacy: After Armed Black Militia Marched In GA, NFAC Founder Speaks," *YouTube*, August 29, 2020.

²⁵ WXIA-TV, "Group of armed demonstrators enter Stone Mountain Park", *Youtube*, August 29, 2020.

²⁶ Jill Nolin, "Stone Mountain Park's overseers to weigh change to Confederate tributes," *Georgia Recorder*, November 16, 2020.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Emil Moffatt, "Stone Mountain Board Approves Limited Changes To Park's Confederate Imagery," *Wabe*, May 24, 2021.

²⁹ Dave Williams, "Stone Mountain Park Adopts New Logo Minus Confederate Imagery," *GPB News*, August 24, 2021.

³⁰ Ryan Gravel and Scott Morris, "What we can do now about Stone Mountain's 150ft Confederate carving," *Guardian*, June 30, 2020.

includes Stone Mountain. As such, this legislation would need to be struck from the record for the monument to be taken down.³¹

After her narrow defeat to incumbent Brian Kemp, the supporters of Abrams found it impossible to implement any sort of change. Those on the Republican side have been resistant to the notion on the basis of state unity, as former Lieutenant Governor Casey Cagle explained when retorting that “instead of dividing Georgians with inflammatory rhetoric for political gain, we should work together to add to our history, not take from it.”³²

A new exhibit at the Park’s Memorial Hall seeking to explain ‘the whole story’ of the monument was opened in May 2021. The exhibit was developed together with ‘credible and well-established historians [...] to tell the warts and all history of the Stone Mountain carving,’ the park’s board stated.³³ The first African-American chair of the Stone Mountain Memorial Association, Reverend Abraham Mosley hoped the exhibition would balance the Park’s ‘historic mission as a Confederate Memorial with today’s broader realities of being [...] Georgia’s most visited tourism destination.’³⁴ More recently, the set of flags including the Confederate battle emblem that stand beneath the carving are being relocated to a new site, as well as the park’s Confederate Hall and Environmental Education Centre to ‘Heritage Hall.’³⁵ The park’s logo, which previously donned the carving of the three Confederates, now features the southern face of the mountain, after a decision made by the Stone Mountain Memorial Association in August 2021.³⁶

Summary and Conclusions

The carving has become a campaign issue, but no concrete action has been taken to address its controversial nature. The prospect for the implementation of potential action has been most vocally raised by Stacey Abrams. In turn, because of Abrams’ loss, and in spite of recent *Black Lives Matter* affiliated protests, it has lost salience as a political issue. Even if a growing appetite for change managed to cultivate a concerted adjustment strategy, any action taken relating to the Confederate monument would need to navigate arduous legislative procedure. In order for any alterations to occur, the Georgia State Congress would have to first amend the State Law Code to allow for the alteration or removal of the carving, and only then could any further action be taken to address it.

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³¹ Lorraine Boissoneault, “What Will Happen to Stone Mountain, America’s Largest Confederate Memorial?” *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 22, 2017.

³² Steve Hendrix, “Ugly past, fraught future of the biggest Confederate monument,” *News Leader*, December 11, 2019.

³³ Theresa Waldrop & Jamiel Lynch, “Nation’s largest Confederate memorial to get new exhibit telling the ‘whole story’ of Georgia’s Stone Mountain,” *CNN*, May 25, 2021.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Beau Evans, “Stone Mountain Confederate Carving, Flag Proposals Set For Vote,” *GPB News*, May 21, 2021.

³⁶ Dave Williams, “Stone Mountain Park Adopts New Logo Minus Confederate Imagery,” *GPB News*, August 24, 2021.

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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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