

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Monuments tell stories, sometimes false



**Douglas Kindschi** *Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

In the past two weeks' Insights, I have written about statues and monuments, with particular attention to monuments that become symbols that verge on the sacred and run the danger of becoming idols. Statues and monuments tell stories, sometimes to inform about our history in ways that can be educational, but sometimes to tell a different political story that seeks to create a new history that is false.

As I have become more aware of the statues in Grand Rapids, I have found both kinds. For example, I was not previously aware of the story of three scientists from Grand Rapids who made the critical discoveries leading to the vaccine against whooping cough. In the 1930s, bacteriologists Pearl Kendrick and Grace Eldering, working in Grand Rapids with Michigan Department of Health laboratories, began collecting samples from children who were suffering from whooping cough, one of the deadliest childhood diseases of that time. Their research led to the development and field testing of one of the first effective vaccines to prevent the disease. In the 1940s, an African American scientist named Loney Clinton Gordon joined the lab. She isolated a new strain of pertussis that led to a more effective vaccine. The work of these three women supported research on the DTP shot that protects against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis, or whooping cough. This standard vaccine is used today, enabling parents to safely vaccinate their children against multiple diseases at once.

The work of these scientists in Grand Rapids in the middle of the Great Depression resulted in tens of thousands of children being saved from death by this terrible disease. Their story is introduced by a statue at Michigan State University's new research center for the College of Human Medicine on the corner of Michigan Street and Monroe Avenue. Of course, a statue is only the beginning of the story of these three women and the larger efforts of many others working in the state laboratory in Grand Rapids. It did, however, lead me to learn more about them and their inspiring story, including a report on the History.com website that can be accessed at [bit.ly/GRscientists](http://bit.ly/GRscientists).

One also learns more from this report that Grand Valley State University history professor Carolyn Shapiro-Shapin researched this aspect of health and vaccine history and has written several scholarly articles on it. The statue can't tell the whole story, but it introduces us to an important aspect of our city's history and the inspiring story of a disease conquered.

A half-block away on Monroe Avenue NW is a statue of Lyman Parks, Grand Rapids' first African American mayor. He served from 1971 to 1976 and is recognized for his important role in initiating the revitalization of downtown Grand Rapids.

These stories are worth remembering as we seek to understand our community.

But there are other statues and monuments in our country and even in our community that tell or seek to reinforce false narratives. The statue of Noahquageshik, also referred to as Chief Noonday, on the riverbank near the Blue Bridge, has been described as portraying him welcoming European American settlers, while ignoring the

suffering and genocide of Native Americans by European settlers. I have benefited from feedback from Native Americans who want the fuller story told.

The Civil War statue in Allendale's Veterans Garden of Honor has been controversial and properly protested against. Why a community in Michigan, whose Civil War units sent 90,000 soldiers from our state to fight for the Union, would depict a rebel Confederate soldier with equal standing to the Union soldier is beyond my understanding. The depiction of a diminished black slave at their feet reaching for freedom is despicable and should also be protested. Why not portray one of the 1,600 Black soldiers who also served with the 1st Michigan Infantry?

I have written in previous Insights about the idolizing of Confederate statues that are also in the news, but now the question is what should be our action. Instructive commentary, consistent with my intent, can be found in the current issue of Christian Century. Peter Marty, the editor/publisher, writes an essay titled, "Sanitizing history." He decries "the fictional narrative behind the (Confederate) monuments themselves ... installed to rewrite history and whitewash truths about the searing legacy of slavery." He notes that "these towering monuments served to disguise the Confederacy's doomed act of mass treason and failed attempt to preserve slavery."

Marty continues to call for further attention to the issue of removal of such monuments and quotes former New Orleans Mayor Mitchell Landrieu, who led the process of the city taking down four Confederate monuments, including a 60-foot one honoring Robert E. Lee. He quotes Landrieu: "Consider these monuments from the perspective of an African American mother or father trying to explain to their fifth-grade daughter who Robert E. Lee is and why he stands atop our beautiful city. Can you do it? Can you look into that young girl's eyes and convince her that Robert E. Lee is there to encourage her? Do you think she will feel inspired and hopeful by that story?"

In a recent video interview, Landrieu explained that while it is important to remove a memorial that depicts a false narrative, the process of making that decision is also important. His efforts in New Orleans took more than three years and were difficult and laborious, but that was also part of the community's education about the sanitizing of our history. However, when the authorities refuse to do this, then protests are not only appropriate but patriotic and become the beginning of that educational process.

I agree with all of these sentiments and it is what led me to conclude in my July 30 column, "Remembering our history is important, but we must be mindful that statues that become monuments can also become symbols that verge on the sacred and run the danger of leading to idolatry. Our faith traditions as well as our good sense should warn us against such misuse."

Statues and monuments tell stories and they should seek to be honest in what they portray. They can never tell the whole story, and it is important to correct the errors or misguided impressions that may have motivated such stories. This can be a process of education and learning for our communities as we go through the often painful process of correcting our history.

[interfaith@gvsu.edu](mailto:interfaith@gvsu.edu)



**The Grand Rapids Community Legends Project dedicated a sculpture Sept. 27 honoring three researchers who developed the pertussis vaccine in a public health lab in Grand Rapids, from left, Pearl Kendrick, Grace Eldering and Loney Clinton Gordon. The piece, by sculptor Jay Hall Carpenter, is at the Michigan State University Research Center, 400 Monroe Ave. NW. [MLive.com/files](http://MLive.com/files)**

**"Consider these monuments from the perspective of an African American mother or father trying to explain to their fifth-grade daughter who Robert E. Lee is and why he stands atop our beautiful city. Can you do it?"**

*Mitchell Landrieu, former mayor of New Orleans*