

History Department Statement on the Confederate Monument in Allendale

A statue is meant to be an infallible and official statement of history. Its purpose is not to spark a debate, but to assert a definitive version of the past. It tells us who from the past is important and worthy of emulation. It memorializes a person or event, and serves to set in stone that they were exemplary and deserve to be honored across the ages.

Monuments such as those of Confederate political leaders, officers, soldiers, and veterans venerate the Confederate past and white supremacy. Confederate monuments glorify a slave society that was built on and existed because of the enslavement and subjugation of Black people. These monuments were put in place by groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy to inscribe in public spaces their conviction that white supremacy - past, present, and future - was an honorable system that must be defended. Today they function as a warning to Black people that white people still control the levers of political power. This is reflected in the production of our most durable narratives of the past.

Public commemoration and celebration of white supremacy does not help us ‘remember history,’ and eliminating those commemorations does not ‘erase history.’ Rather, calls to take down monuments and rename buildings arise from the belief that we, as a society, should not publicly celebrate slavery and racism. Black people should not be made to share in a communal honoring of those who enslaved and murdered their ancestors. It is long past time for us as a nation to reconsider who is commemorated on our streets and campuses; we insist that those who actively fought for the enslavement and white supremacy should not be venerated.

We recognize that eliminating the public and official symbols of white supremacy is but one step toward the actual elimination of white supremacy. Structural racism, including state violence against the bodies of Black people and continuing disparities in educational and economic opportunities, will be much more difficult to eradicate. Yet reclaiming public space from white supremacist imagery is necessary nonetheless; just as erecting symbols of white supremacy has meaning, so too does the destruction of those symbols.

The History Department of Grand Valley State University (GVSU) formally supports the over 3,500 people who signed [the petition](#) to remove the Confederate statue currently standing in the Veteran’s Garden of Honor in Allendale Community Park. The Grand Valley Board of Trustees [strategic plan](#) claims that “Grand Valley intends to be a national model for equity and inclusion in higher education...by contributing to local and national discourse on the responsibility of higher education to provide equity and inclusion to all students, faculty, and staff.” The Confederate monument in Allendale, the community that houses GVSU, is antithetical to these values. Indeed, Confederate soldiers fought to dismantle the United States in order to protect a system of slavery based on unapologetic white supremacy. Arguing that this is somehow worthy of memorialization is absurd. The statue pretends that the values of Confederate and Union soldiers were equivalent, and by honoring both sides it conveys a message that Black people are not truly welcome in Allendale. It should be removed immediately.