

“Telling Our Own Story”: Analyzing the Recontextualization of the *Spirit of the Confederacy*  
Monument by the Houston Museum of African American Culture

by  
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## ABSTRACT

In 2020, the Houston Museum of African American Culture (HMAAC) acquired *Spirit of the Confederacy*, a Confederate monument commissioned by the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) in 1908. As a result, HMAAC became the first and only known African American museum in the United States to house and display a Confederate monument. Interested in the significance of the museum's acquisition for the nation's Confederate monument debate – which is generally divided between those who view monuments as emblems of a southern heritage and those who view them as connected to anti-Black racism and white supremacy – this thesis examined two key questions. First, as an establishment that extends the tradition of African American museums while attempting a new, contemporary, and multicultural vision, how does HMAAC respond to the legacy of white supremacy encapsulated in *Spirit of the Confederacy*? Second, how does the museum's acquisition expand upon our understanding of the Houston Robert E. Lee Chapter's activities and its commissioning of *Spirit*?

This thesis analyzed primary sources related to the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the UDC and HMAAC. It contextualized those sources with previous scholarship on the Confederate tradition, the African American museum movement, and relevant periods in American history, including the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Jim Crow Era. The findings of this project suggest that HMAAC's acquisition of *Spirit* exemplifies and extends the museum's simultaneous commitment to the African American museum tradition and its present-day multicultural, community-oriented mission. These findings may be of interest to American/African American museums who, in pondering what to do with monuments remaining in public spaces, can refer this case study to inform their handling of these controversial items.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2021, *CBS News* writer Jason Silverstein wrote about the global response to the murder of George Floyd, a former Houston Third Ward resident, by Minneapolis police officers in the summer of 2020. On May 25, 2020, four Minneapolis Police Department officers took Floyd into custody after a convenience store employee alleged that he purchased cigarettes with a counterfeit bill. After handcuffing Floyd and forcing him to lay face down on the street, Derek Chauvin, a white officer, knelt on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, continuing even as Floyd lost consciousness.<sup>1</sup> According to Silverstein, Floyd's death, recorded by a seventeen-year-old African American girl named Darnella Frazier, "sparked the largest racial justice protests in the United States since the Civil Rights Movement." Furthermore, activists worldwide demonstrated their support for the American-born movement, viewing Floyd's death "as a symbol of the intolerance and injustice they face[d] at home."<sup>2</sup> Amid this international outcry, the Houston Museum of African American Culture (HMAAC), a small museum located in the Museum District in Houston, Texas, adopted an item that Floyd's death, the Unite the Right Rally of 2017, and the Emanuel A.M.E. church massacre of 2015 gradually called into question: a Confederate monument.

The *Spirit of the Confederacy*, commissioned by Houston's Robert E. Lee Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) in 1908, stood in Sam

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<sup>1</sup> Evan Hill et al., "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody," *New York Times*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Jason Silverstein, "The global impact of George Floyd: How Black Lives Matter protests shaped movements around the world," *CBS News*, June 4, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/george-floyd-black-lives-matter-impact/>.



Houston Park until its removal under Mayor Sylvester Turner in 2020.<sup>3</sup> After Floyd's death, the museum predicted that granting the monument to Houston's first African American cultural museum would be a sensitive event for the Black community. In a press release, the museum stated that "we receive this monument at a time when our community is hurting, as America comes face to face with the racism and police brutality we have endured since our 'freedom' after the Civil War."<sup>4</sup> Yet, never shying away from difficult conversations about current events, HMAAC used *Spirit* to confront the nation's legacy of racial injustice and promote healing through education. Situated in the museum's private courtyard, where eye-shaped sculptures in artist Bert L. Long, Jr.'s *Field of Vision* stare at it, *Spirit* reminds visitors about America's white supremacist past and warns against its resurgence.

HMAAC's decision to adopt a Confederate monument – the first and only known African American museum known to do so to date – has created a complex space of interest in the field of public history.<sup>5</sup> It is a historical monument occupying a contemporary space; it flips the notion of teaching the "truth" about the Civil War as advocated by the UDC by spotlighting the history and continuation of racism; and it

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<sup>3</sup> Isis Davis-Marks, "Why the Houston Museum of African American Culture Is Displaying a Confederate Statue," *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/why-houston-museum-african-american-culture-displaying-confederate-statue-180975742/>.

<sup>4</sup> "HMAAC Receives Confederate Monument from the City of Houston," HMAAC, <https://hmaac.org/hmaac-receives-confederate-monument-from-the-city-of-houston>.

<sup>5</sup> The Black History and Culture Center of Virginia has tentatively agreed to accept a statue of Gen. Robert E. Lee from Richmond. Livia Gershon, "Richmond's Robert E. Lee Statue Is Headed to a Black History Museum," *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 5, 2022, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/richmond-confederate-monuments-headed-to-black-history-museum-180979319/>.

invites what many interpret as a symbol of white supremacy into a space intended for cultural empowerment through African American art. Additionally, the monument's relocation occurred as historians and the public pondered the future of Confederate monuments remaining in public spaces. Louis Nelson, a professor of architectural history at the University of Virginia, argues not for moving monuments out of public view but for recontextualizing them: transforming monument squares into "open-air" spaces appropriate for learning about "the simultaneous histories of lynching, Confederate monuments, and Jim Crow policies."<sup>6</sup> Already, recontextualization has been exemplified by such institutions as the University of Texas at Austin, which relocated a monument of Confederate president Jefferson Davis to the Briscoe Center for American History in 2017.<sup>7</sup> However, HMAAC's recent adoption of *Spirit* provides a unique opportunity to study the recontextualization of a Confederate monument by a contemporary Black museum.

This thesis examines two key questions. First, as an establishment that extends the tradition of African American museums while attempting a new, contemporary, and multicultural vision, how does HMAAC respond to the legacy of white supremacy encapsulated in *Spirit of the Confederacy*? Second, how does the museum's acquisition expand upon our understanding of the Houston Robert E. Lee Chapter's activities and its commissioning of *Spirit*?

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<sup>6</sup> "The End of an Era: On History, Context, and Confederate Monuments," International Coalition of Sites on Conscience, <https://www.sitesofconscience.org/en/2017/05/the-end-of-an-era-on-history-context-and-confederate-monuments/>.

<sup>7</sup> Don Carleton, "UT removed Confederate statues from campus, not the classroom," *The Hill*, August 23, 2017, <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/education/347704-ut-is-removing-confederate-statues-from-display-but-not-from-the?rl=1>.

My research focuses on HMAAC's efforts to reclaim, retell, and reinterpret a narrative traditionally dominated by supporters of the Confederacy. When the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the UDC commissioned *Spirit* in 1908, its members framed the monument as a personification of Confederate valor, the consummation of the Daughters' goal of constructing a monument in Houston, and a memorial for the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for "states' rights." In perpetuating the Lost Cause myth, these interpretations downplayed the centrality of slavery and anti-Black racism against Black Americans to the Civil War. "We, at HMAAC, understand the importance of telling our own story, advancing our own narrative," HMAAC's press release concludes. "The challenge is how we place this evidence [of racism] in a narrative context that educates and heals."<sup>8</sup> How the museum has chosen to "[advance its] own narrative" considering its finances, community obligations, and logistical options is a driving question for this thesis.

For this project, I examined primary sources related to the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the UDC and HMAAC. I contextualized them with previous scholarship on the Confederate tradition, the African American museum movement, and relevant periods in American history. Then, I viewed my research through two theoretical lenses. First, I accounted for the contested relationship between history and memory, recognizing, as historian Daniel Walkowitz and anthropologist Lisa Knauer have, that "public spaces, museums, and...the built environment (from architecture to statuary)" manifest

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<sup>8</sup> "HMAAC Receives Confederate Monument from the City of Houston."

selective, collective, and/or political interpretations of the past.<sup>9</sup> “[C]itizens have fought over the meaning of historical sites for hundreds of years,” they point out. “Political transformations, then serve as triggers or flashpoints for renewed struggles over the legacy of the past.”<sup>10</sup> In this thesis, such “triggers” would include the murder of George Floyd, the 2017 Unite the Right Rally, and the 2015 Emmanuel A.M.E. church massacre, all of which magnified the already extant debate over the fate of Confederate monuments remaining in public spaces.

Secondly, to historian Tyina Steptoe, the Black community is linguistically, historically, and culturally diverse. Not all composite groups (e.g., Black Texans, creoles of color) shared the experience of southern enslavement when they migrated to Houston following the Civil War (although Anglo Americans discriminated against all of them as Black Americans via Houston’s legal black/white binary).<sup>11</sup> To explain the development and expression of new racial identities, Steptoe uses historian Nan Enstad’s insightful definition of *racial subjectivity*: “the premise that *who one is* is neither essential nor fixed, but is continually shaped and reshaped in human social exchange.”<sup>12</sup> By taking a non-essentialized approach to Blackness – hesitating to assume that concrete characteristics are attached to the “Black experience” – I will (1) acknowledge HMAAC’s multicultural vision and (2) examine its telling of the African American story as a potential source of empowerment and healing for the community.

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer, “Introduction,” in *Memory and the Impact of Political Transformation in Public Space*, eds. Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer (Duke University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Tyina L. Steptoe, *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 7-10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 7.

This thesis is divided into four chapters that progress in chronological order. Chapter 1 provides background on *Spirit* and the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the UDC, contrasting the realities of slavery, Reconstruction, and the Jim Crow era for Black Americans with the Lost Cause myth. According to rhetorician Amy Lynn Heyse, the Lost Cause myth insists “on the Confederacy’s moral and righteous victory against aggressive outside forces despite their military defeat.”<sup>13</sup> This interpretation, historian Gaines M. Foster argues, emerged as southerners struggled to confront the social tensions of the Reconstruction and New South eras following the Confederacy’s defeat.<sup>14</sup> Thus, they attempted to vindicate their cause by claiming that the Civil War began over a conflict about “states’ rights,” “that Confederates were not rebels or traitors,” and “that slavery was not a cause of the war.”<sup>15</sup>

Chapter 2 reviews the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction eras. Focusing on some Black Americans’ desire to combat beliefs in Black inferiority, it spotlights African Americans’ cultural contributions and the eventual coalescence of an African American museum movement. Chapter 3 concentrates on Houston, piecing together HMAAC’s history and acquisition of *Spirit of the Confederacy*, which I contextualize using a report published by Mayor Sylvester Turner’s task force. Finally, Chapter 4 examines HMAAC’s handling of *Spirit*. This chapter uses the concept of recontextualization to frame my analysis of the museum’s website, which is the only

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<sup>13</sup> Amy Lynn Heyse, “The Rhetoric of Memory-Making: Lessons from the UDC’s Catechisms for Children,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2008): 415.

<sup>14</sup> Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Karen L. Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2003), 1; Heyse, “The Rhetoric of Memory-Making,” 415.

way visitors can engage with *Spirit* at this time, given the monument's public inaccessibility due to security concerns surrounding its physical display.

# **CHAPTER 1 – SLAVERY, THE END OF THE CIVIL WAR, AND THE RISE OF THE UNITED DAUGHTERS OF THE CONFEDERACY**

The end of the Civil War brought far-reaching changes to American society. On January 1, 1863, two years before the war's conclusion, President of the United States Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. On paper, the proclamation liberated the enslaved people "of Confederate states in rebellion against the Union."<sup>1</sup> However, Texas's enslaved population would not be emancipated for two years. Hindered by the refusal of Confederate states to recognize Lincoln's authority, the Confederate army's persistence against the Union until mid-May of 1865, and poor communication systems, Union General Gordon Granger finally announced General Order No. 3 on June 19, 1865, which legally freed Texas's enslaved population.<sup>2</sup> From that point forward, Black freedmen in Texas began the arduous journey of rebuilding their lives after enslavement; they would also reclaim their racial identity through various modes of expression in their schools, in their neighborhoods, and in their material culture. The African American community celebrated the date of their emancipation as Juneteenth for 156 years before it was recognized as a federal holiday in 2021 for all Americans to commemorate.

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<sup>1</sup>"Emancipation Proclamation," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Emancipation-Proclamation>; Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 530.

<sup>2</sup> Annette Gordon-Reed, *On Juneteenth* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021), 11; Randolph B. Campbell, *Gone to Texas: History of the Line Star State* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 269.

As U.S. historian Eric Foner points out, Americans grappled with the implications of freedom for Black citizens. Echoing the choices that confronted lawmakers of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, Foner asks, “Did freedom simply mean the absence of slavery, or did it imply other rights for the former slaves, and if so, which ones: equal rights, the vote, ownership of property?”<sup>3</sup> To some extent, Reconstruction (1865-1877) attempted to help freedmen achieve a higher standard of living, as exemplified by the Freedmen’s Bureau. Operant in the eleven former rebel states, Maryland, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Washington D.C., this federal organization aimed to secure the same legal protections for Blacks as whites, establish schools, monitor labor contracts to ensure fairness, and unite family members scattered by slavery.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, many white, landowning southerners resisted the idea of ceding their political dominance to formerly enslaved people. During the first few years of Reconstruction, between 1865 and 1870, Texans who opposed the Radical Republican Congress preferred Union military occupation over the “Africanization” of the state. By 1868, the platform of the Democratic Party in Texas “called on delegates to prevent black suffrage at all costs, even if that meant excluding the readmission of Texas to the Union.”<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, as southern Democrats portrayed themselves as “redeeming” the South while vying to regain political control from Republican-dominated state

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<sup>3</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty!*, 565.

<sup>4</sup> Jesús F. de la Teja, Ron Tyler, and Nancy Beck Young, *Texas: Crossroads of North America* (Cengage, 2016), 276; “Freedmen’s Bureau,” History, last updated October 3, 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/freedmens-bureau>.

<sup>5</sup> Scott L. Stabler, “Free Men Come to Houston: Blacks During Reconstruction,” *The Houston Review* 3, no. 1 (2005): 74.



governments, white male and female southerners struggled to accept the reality of the Confederacy's defeat. In response, white women, especially those from the upper class, soothed their men's emotional wounds by memorializing Confederate veterans, alive and deceased, and assuring former soldiers that the cause for which they fought had been righteous. More significantly, these women, many of whom went on to form the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) in 1894, ignited a decades-long monument-building campaign that helped perpetuate the myths of the Lost Cause and Old South. In asserting their feminine duty to commemorate their Confederate forefathers, the UDC crafted a Civil War narrative that denied the centrality of slavery to the war and provided a template for race relations that justified and encouraged segregation from that point forward.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Slavery in Texas Before and During the Civil War**

To understand the rise of the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, it is important to note Texas's position before and during the Civil War as a Confederate state. Between 1845 and 1860, cotton cultivation had spread into central Texas from previously settled regions in the South. Within a decade, cotton became one of the state's most productive crops.<sup>6</sup> As farmers harvested 58,000 bales between 1849 and 1850 – “and more than seven times that only ten years later” – the

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<sup>6</sup> de la Teja, Tyler, and Young, *Texas: Crossroads of North America*, 247.

number of enslaved Black people in Texas leaped from 30,505 in 1846 to almost 183,000 in 1860 to meet labor demands.<sup>7</sup> By 1860, enslaved African Americans comprised about one-third of the state's population.<sup>8</sup> In Houston specifically, the urban slave population also doubled from 527 to 1,061 persons. Many worked as either personal servants or wage-earners for their owners.<sup>9</sup>

Ironically, slavery benefited Anglo Texans unevenly despite their acceptance of the institution. According to the authors of *Texas: Crossroads of North America*, "The 27 percent of the population that owned slaves held almost three-fourths of the wealth in Texas by 1860." By contrast, "most Texas citizens did not own slaves and, of those who did, most owned only one to four."<sup>10</sup> Although only a fraction of white Texans profited handsomely from the wealth that Black labor generated, Texas overwhelmingly developed an identity as a "slave state." Having seceded from the antislavery Mexican government during the Texas Revolution (1835-1836), the former republic welcomed Anglo American migrants from the American South, many of whom held proslavery attitudes.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the state's location below the 36°30 latitude, above which the 1820 Missouri Compromise originally outlawed slavery, naturally "pushed Texas towards the southern-slave state camp."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Jackson, "Slavery in Houston: The 1850s," *The Houston Review: History and Culture of the Gulf Coast* (Summer 1980): 67, <https://houstonhistorymagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Slavery-in-Houston-The-1850s-by-Susan-Jackson.pdf>. The historian Susan Jackson speculates that the "median age" of Houston's slaves, and the number of enslaved women, increased, as unskilled male youths were more likely to be sold to the countryside for fieldwork (67).

<sup>10</sup> de la Teja, Tyler, and Young, *Texas: Crossroads of North America*, 247.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

However, Texas slavery was not simply the inevitable byproduct of national events or the boom in cotton. Many white Texans consciously chose to dehumanize and enslave their Black counterparts using biblical, scientific, and other rationales as justification. In his study of white Texans' views of Blacks between 1900 and 1910, historian Bruce Glasrud concludes that white Texans largely stereotyped African Americans as either "childlike" or "bestial." Whereas some whites believed the childish "negro" necessitated care from their benevolent masters, those who viewed Blacks as inherently violent subjected them to "rigid control, whipping, and, too often, lynching."<sup>13</sup> Before the Civil War, John Salmon "Rip" Ford, a colonel who led Confederate forces to victory at the Battle of Palmito Ranch, "argued that the institution [of slavery] was in harmony with natural law," historians Jesús de la Teja, Ron Tyler, and Nancy Beck Young write. To Ford, "It was sanctioned by the Bible, and it had all the authority of time to uphold it."<sup>14</sup>

As the United States acquired western territories, leading the nation's congressmen to debate whether, and by what means, a state would enter the Union as "free" or "enslaved," southern states, incensed by the 1860 election of President Abraham Lincoln – a man they perceived as a threat to the expansion of slavery – began

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 248; Bruce A. Glasrud, "Child or Beast?: White Texas' View of Blacks, 1900-1910," *East Texas Historical Journal* 15, no. 2 (1977): 38. To make this generalization, Glasrud examined the "utterances of public officials," "newspaper editorializing and treatment of Negro news" in media, and "the general white acceptance" of racial violence in Texas (38).

<sup>14</sup> de la Teja, Tyler, and Young, *Texas: Crossroads of North America*, 248; "John Salmon 'Rip' Ford," American Battlefield Trust, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/john-salmon-rip-ford>.

seceding from the Union in 1861.<sup>15</sup> In its *Declaration of the Causes which Impel the State of Texas to Secede from the Federal Union*, ratified on March 2, 1861, Texan lawmakers emphasized the naturalness of slavery and condemned the North's efforts to destroy it:

In all the non-slave-holding States, in violation of that good faith and comity which should exist between entirely distinct nations, the people have formed themselves into a great sectional party, now strong enough in numbers to control the affairs of each of those States, based upon an unnatural feeling of hostility to these Southern States and their beneficent and patriarchal system of African slavery, proclaiming the debasing doctrine of equality of all men, irrespective of race or color—a doctrine at war with nature, in opposition to the experience of mankind, and in violation of the plainest revelations of Divine Law....By consolidating their strength, they [abolitionists] have placed the slave-holding States in a hopeless minority in the federal congress...They have proclaimed, and at the ballot box sustained, the revolutionary doctrine that there is a 'higher law' than the constitution and laws of our Federal Union, and virtually that they will disregard their oaths and trample upon our rights.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> de la Teja, Tyler, and Young, *Texas: Crossroads of North America*, 250-251; James McPherson, "Mexico Will Poison Us" in *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 47-77; Eric Foner, "A Dose of Arsenic" in *Give Me Liberty!* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 488-496.

<sup>16</sup> "The Declaration of Causes of Seceding States," American Battlefield Trust, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/primary-sources/declaration-causes-seceding-states>.

Clearly referencing the ability to own enslaved Africans as a constitutional right, the writers of this secession document preferred severing ties with the Union over accepting “the debasing doctrine of equality of all men.” As de la Teja, Tyler, and Young summarize, “Texans who could vote—overwhelmingly white southern males—favored an economic system based on cotton cultivation, and, by extension, slave labor. They also favored a caste system that valued white over black. And they valued states’ rights over continuing in a Union controlled by people who opposed the continued growth of a slave system.”<sup>17</sup> It is this set of values that the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy celebrated and embodied through its seminal monument, *Spirit of the Confederacy*, in 1908, which touts the Confederates’ defense of states’ rights and slavery as the writers of Texas’s *Declaration* had done.

Admittedly, the states of the Lower South – many of which were the first to secede – were not alone in their support of slavery. Before the Civil War, the southern economy relied on the patronage of national and international investors. According to historian Eric Foner, “Textile manufacturers in places as far-flung as Massachusetts, Lancashire in Great Britain, Normandy in France, and the suburbs of Moscow depended on a regular supply of American cotton.” Likewise, northern investors, banks, insurance companies, and factories participated in the slave economy despite the North’s abolition of slavery by 1804.<sup>18</sup> “Money earned in the cotton trade helped to finance industrial development and internal improvements in the North,” Foner explains.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> de la Teja, Tyler, and Young, *Texas: Crossroads of North America*, 252.

<sup>18</sup> “Slavery in America,” History, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/slavery>.

<sup>19</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty!*, 406-408.

Yet, regardless of slavery's entrenchment in the international and northern economies, southerners' glorification of the Confederacy, which explicitly embraced and fought to perpetuate slavery based on their belief in white supremacy, disquieted Black Americans. In *No Common Ground*, historian Karen L. Cox documents criticisms of the Lost Cause, which this thesis explains, and Confederate symbols by African Americans after the Civil War.<sup>20</sup> For example, in 1870, Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass "'called out the 'nauseating flatteries of the late Robert E. Lee' that poured in after the Confederate general's death, asking, 'Is it not about time that this bombastic laudation of the rebel chief should cease?'"<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Black Americans' dislike for Confederate symbols – particularly for their representation of white supremacy and racism – circulated throughout their communities.<sup>22</sup> Following the unveiling of the equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee in 1890, a local Black newspaper called the *Richmond Planet* opined that "[t]he display of 'rebel flags,' including one 'mammoth Confederate flag' that covered the entire length of city hall, alongside the gathering of Confederate veterans giving a full-throated 'rebel yell...told in no uncertain tones that they still clung to theories which were presumably to be buried for all eternity.'"<sup>23</sup>

According to Cox, African Americans cautiously expressed their opinions. "Outside of safe spaces like private homes, churches, or a Masonic lodge, the fear of reprisal from local whites prohibited African American adults from making their

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<sup>20</sup> Cited from Karen L. Cox, *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 60.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 62.

feelings about monuments public in the Jim Crow South,” she writes.<sup>24</sup> It was not until 1983 that Mamie Garvin Fields, an African American clubwoman from South Carolina born in 1888, wrote in her memoir about her feelings of being belittled by a statue of John C. Calhoun, a proslavery Senator, in Charleston:

At the same time that [Frederick] Douglass was preaching against slavery, John C. Calhoun was preaching for it...Our white city fathers wanted to keep what [Calhoun] stood for alive...[T]hey put up a life-size figure of John C. Calhoun preaching...Blacks took that statue personally. As you passed by, here was Calhoun looking at you in the face and telling you, “Nigger, you may not be a slave, but I am back to see you stay in your place.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Women of the Confederacy**

With the surrender of Confederate General Robert E. Lee at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, on April 9, 1865, the Civil War ended.<sup>26</sup> Throughout the South, former Confederates responded in a variety of ways to their defeat, responses which would contextualize the rise of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Some, like the Confederate soldier John Dooley, “[withdrew] from society” by turning to the church,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>25</sup> Cited from Cox, *No Common Ground*, 61. Joan Marie Johnson, “‘Drill into us...the Rebel tradition’: The Contest over Southern Identity in Black and White Women’s Clubs, South Carolina, 1898-1930,” *The Journal of Southern History* 66, no. 3 (2000): 525. Johnson cites Mamie Garvin Fields with Karen Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir* (New York and London, 1893), 57.

<sup>26</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty!*, 559.

pinning for “its shelter from ‘the outside storms and cares of life,’ civil wars, and the fall of republics.”<sup>27</sup> In contrast, others began doubting their faith, as exemplified by Grace Brown Elmore of South Carolina: “Hard thoughts against my God arise,” she despaired. “Questions of his justice, of his mercy arise, and refuse to be silenced.”<sup>28</sup> Conflicting reactions persisted as the Union carried out its Reconstruction plans. Some white southerners capitulated to the “Radical” Republicans, and a few, seeking to escape prosecution or resisting the idea of living with Black freedmen, left the United States altogether, fleeing to Latin American countries like Brazil where the dream of founding another “Old South” beckoned them.<sup>29</sup> But largely, Foster concludes, white southerners in the former Confederacy acknowledged their defeat. Recognizing that they had family responsibilities and economic interests requiring their care at home, they sought to return to “full participation in politics and society” after the war.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, despite many Confederates’ willingness to accept their new reality, widespread evidence of change permeated southern society, the most significant being a “watershed in gender relations” that historian Kelly McMichael Stott believes weakened patriarchy.<sup>31</sup> As Foster observes of the Old South’s codes of honor, personal

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<sup>27</sup> Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 18.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 15-16.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Kelly McMichael Stott, “From Lost Cause to Female Empowerment: The Texas Division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, 1896-1966” (PhD diss., University of North Texas, 2001), 20. Note that Stott cautions readers against overestimating the consequences of the war for Texan men, 60,000 of whom served in Confederate armies. “Although their deaths or battle-related disabilities surely led to disruptions and deprivations during and after the war, Texans did not suffer ravages inflicted on other southern states,” Stott writes (43). Stott cites Randolph Campbell, “The 1860 Military-Age White Male Population of Harrison County in the Civil War,” database.



bravery, and oath-taking – beliefs “central to a male’s status” – “The war and its aftermath led some men to question whether they had [demonstrated personal bravery and protected their women].”<sup>32</sup> As if to harp on the matter, northern cartoonists caricatured President Jefferson Davis’s retreat from the Confederacy in women’s clothes, seen as an insult to southern men and women alike and perceived as an attack on southern manhood as a whole. By contrast, southern women’s service on the home front elevated their reputation as supporters of the Confederate cause. As Foner writes in his book, *Give Me Liberty!*,

Even more than in the North, the war placed unprecedented burdens on southern white women. Left alone on farms and plantations, they were often forced to manage business affairs and discipline slaves, previously the responsibility of men. As in the North, women mobilized to support soldiers in the field and stepped out of their traditional “sphere” to run commercial establishments and work in arms factories...Southern women’s self-sacrificing devotion to the cause became legendary.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, the notion of a complete breakdown in gender relations may not fully capture the crisis that white southerners faced. For example, Foster points out that women’s economic opportunities did not increase substantially during the war. Lacking an organized women’s rights movement, “marrying more frequently than before the war, and embracing the returning soldiers, women...appeared to return happily to their status under the old code.”<sup>34</sup> However, it was precisely this adherence to the old code

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<sup>32</sup> Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 25-26.

<sup>33</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty!*, 565.

<sup>34</sup> Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 31.

that epitomized “Southern women’s self-sacrificing devotion.” “Confederate women’s experience as nurses, laborers in munition factories, and members of soldiers’ aid societies gave them the necessary skills and confidence to meet the social and cultural needs of the region in the war’s aftermath,” historian Karen L. Cox argues.<sup>35</sup> Whether their male counterparts busied themselves with economic opportunities under the New South, or whether women sought to fulfill their traditional roles as society’s “kinkeepers,” southern women would dedicate themselves and their newfound skills to vindicating the Confederacy.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, they would use their reputation as caretakers and keepers of the domestic sphere to justify their political and memorializing activities under the culminating women’s organization, the United Daughters of the Confederacy. As Mary H. Southworth Kimbrough wrote in her poem “Woman’s Part in War,” published in a 1916 edition of the Confederate Veteran magazine:

Who bears the long suspense of war?... / When from the bloody  
battlefield they bring / Them home? And who must comfort, who restore  
/ Men’s shattered hopes—who must extract the sting / When victory has  
passed them by?...We know / Whose task this is...It has been woman’s  
part in war.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Cox, *No Common Ground*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Cox, *No Common Ground*, 46; Stott, “From Lost Cause to Female Empowerment,” 42. In Stott’s dissertation, the anthropologist Janet Mancini Billson, who uses the word “kinkeeper,” believes that women “have kept alive familial ties and have nurtured a sense of tradition to construct a social conscience in society” (42).

<sup>37</sup> Cited from Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2003), 8. Mary H. Southworth Kimbrough, “Woman’s Part In War,” *Confederate Veteran* 24, no. 8 (1916).

The United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) formed in Nashville, Tennessee on September 10, 1894. Co-founded by Caroline Meriwether Goodlett of Kentucky and Anna Mitchell Davenport Raines of Georgia, the UDC sought to federate “all Southern Women’s Auxiliary, Memorial, and Soldiers’ Aid Societies” under one national, hereditary organization.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the UDC did not just stem from a tradition of female dedication to the Confederate cause; it also reflected the general rise in women’s literature, art, scientific, cultural, Progressive reform, and self-improvement societies towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup> Ladies Memorial Associations (LMAs), for instance - one predecessor of the UDC - sought to mark the graves of the Confederate dead. Likewise, more minor, unnamed societies in Texas towns like Tyler, Bastrop, and Refugio collaborated to donate clothing, food, and medical care to soldiers and their families.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the United Daughters of the Confederacy set out to merge these disparate efforts, proclaiming a dedication to building “a proper respect for and pride in the glorious war history, with a veneration and love for the deeds of their forefathers...and to perpetuate a truthful record of the noble and chivalric achievements of their ancestors.”<sup>41</sup>

Following the creation of the UDC, the Texas Division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which became one of the UDC’s largest auxiliaries, formed in May 1895. The requirements for starting a state division and chapter were minimal: “[s]even

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<sup>38</sup> “United Daughters of the Confederacy,” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, <https://encyclopediaivirginia.org/entries/united-daughters-of-the-confederacy/>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Stott, “From Lost Cause to Female Empowerment,” 20-21.

<sup>41</sup> “United Daughters of the Confederacy,” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, <https://encyclopediaivirginia.org/entries/united-daughters-of-the-confederacy/>.

or more women in any State in which no Division exists, [could] organize a Chapter and be chartered on the application to the United Daughters of the Confederacy.”<sup>42</sup> Like the national UDC, Stott writes, “[t]he newly formed Texas Division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy wrote in its constitution that its objects were ‘memorial, benevolent, historical, and social.’ The association proposed to ‘fulfill the duties of sacred charity toward Confederate veterans and their descendants,’ a need considered ‘pressing’ by these women.”<sup>43</sup>

### **THE ROBERT E. LEE CHAPTER AND *SPIRIT OF THE CONFEDERACY***

On November 11, 1897, Dick Dowling Camp, a veterans’ group named for the hero of the Battle of Sabine Pass, called upon Houston women to form a chapter of the UDC. Several Houston women convened at City Hall on that same evening and named Mrs. Margaret Hadley Foster - a journalist, writer, and Houston’s first paid librarian in 1895 - chairwoman of this endeavor.<sup>44</sup> Just six days later, on November 17, 1897, the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy came to fruition when Foster summoned the chapter’s first meeting at the Lyceum Library. There, the attending members officially established the organization and elected the following officers: Mrs. Joseph Chappell Hutcheson, president; Mrs. Milton G. Howe, first vice president; Mrs. Thomas R. Franklin, second vice president; and Mrs. Margaret Hadley

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<sup>42</sup> “Confederacy, Constitution of The United Daughters of the (1895),” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, <https://encyclopediaofvirginia.org/entries/confederacy-constitution-of-the-united-daughters-of-the-1895/>.

<sup>43</sup> Stott, “From Lost Cause to Female Empowerment,” 31.

<sup>44</sup> Mary E. Bryan, “Robert E. Lee Chapter 186, United Daughters of the Confederacy,” *The Key to the City of Houston* 1, no. 1 (December 1908): 138.

Foster, secretary.<sup>45</sup> Upon attaining fifty members, the Robert E. Lee Chapter applied for and received a charter from the UDC in December 1897, becoming the first Confederate women's organization in Texas to bear the name of the titular general.<sup>46</sup> In gratitude, Lee's daughter, Mildred Lee, sent the organization a "cordial letter of thanks" containing a lock of her father's hair, now preserved at the UDC Museum in Austin, Texas.<sup>47</sup> As remembered by Mary E. Bryan, an early chapter president, in *The Key to the City of Houston*, "The motto selected [for the organization was] that of the Lee family, 'Not unmindful of futurity,' and the flower of a rose."<sup>48</sup>

On the one hand, the Robert E. Lee Chapter broadly assumed the national association's memorial, benevolent, and social objectives.<sup>49</sup> In the 1890s and early 1900s, the newly formed organization sent material aid to a veterans' home in Austin, placed flowers and markers on the graves of Confederate soldiers (whom Bryan dubbed "glorious heroes"), and bestowed crosses of honor upon veterans, the first chapter in Texas to do so.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, permanent manifestations of the UDC chapter's contributions began appearing throughout Houston. For instance, the women funded burial plots for ten deceased soldiers in the Episcopal Cemetery near Sam Houston Park; they also dedicated a drinking fountain in the Houston Library to Father Ryan, a Confederate poet, soldier, and chaplain.<sup>51</sup> Meeting at the city's Christ Church, a local

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 138-139.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>51</sup> Kit van Cleave, "Oldest UDC Chapter Lists Achievements," *Houston Tribune*, May 2, 1968, 14.

YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association), and later, at the homes of its members, the Robert E. Lee Chapter set about caring for and memorializing the Confederate families from which its members descended.<sup>52</sup>

On the other hand, in a manuscript entitled *History of the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy*, President Elizabeth Russell Rodgers (r. 1937-1939) suggested that the chapter revolved around a more focused objective, "the erection of Monuments to all Confederate Veterans, living and dead."<sup>53</sup> Houston's Daughters were not alone in this endeavor at this particular time in American history. According to historian Karen L. Cox, monument building, an activity assumed nationwide by the UDC, experienced its first wave between 1890 and 1920, which coincided with the intensification of Jim Crow laws.<sup>54</sup> Initially, early memorials to the Confederate dead – such as a white, nondescript obelisk erected in Cross Creek Cemetery (Fayetteville, North Carolina) in 1868 – conveyed "simplicity," "dignity," and "bereavement," often mimicking romantic Victorian sculpture.<sup>55</sup> When white southerners approached these monuments, they did so with a "mournful silence," possibly reflecting the region's atmosphere of recent loss and defeat.<sup>56</sup> However, as the

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<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Rodgers, *History of the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy*, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Rodgers, *History of the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy*, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Cox, *No Common Ground*, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Foster, *The Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 41.

<sup>56</sup> Foster, *The Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 41.

Confederate tradition progressed, it became more celebratory of its heroes, and women took charge of these memorialization efforts in the public and political spheres.<sup>57</sup>

Ultimately, the Robert E. Lee Chapter's erection of *Spirit of the Confederacy* epitomized the UDC's dedication to perpetuating a particular version of Civil War history, its ability to amass financial support from community investors, and its contributions to female political mobility and moral authority. Given the incredible "time and effort expended to build regional monuments," the UDC gave their selection of sculptors and monument designs a lot of consideration when possible.<sup>58</sup> The sculptor for *Spirit* – the Italian artist Louis Amateis (1855-1913) – demonstrated a combined interest in "classical allegory" and "portraits of Texas heroes" that likely reflected the chapter members' desire to glorify the Confederate cause as righteous and worthy of remembrance.<sup>59</sup> By 1908, Amateis's portfolio contained a seventy-four-foot-high monument to the heroes of the Texas Revolution in Galveston (1900), a bronze monument to Confederate soldiers in Houston's City Park (1894-1912), and busts of President Chester A. Arthur, Union General Winfield Scott Hancock, and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie.<sup>60</sup> After emigrating from Turin, Italy to the United States, he

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<sup>57</sup> Foster, *The Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 89, 104; Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*, 11. These authors reference the following as reasons for the increased celebratory tone: (1) increased sectional reconciliation, (2) the growth of Confederate organizations like the United Confederate Veterans, whose members "guided the celebration of the war" (Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 104), (3) the simple passage of time, and (4) "the end of political Reconstruction and the advent of Democratic control over state and local governments" (Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*, 11).

<sup>58</sup> Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*, 55.

<sup>59</sup> "Handbook of Texas Online: Amateis, Louis," Last Updated February 15, 1999, Box 8, Folder 36, RG A 33 Houston Municipal Art Commission Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, TX.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

eventually founded the School of Fine Arts at Columbia University, and also designed bronze doors for the western entrance to the U.S. Capitol.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Amateis's work figured prominently in the American artistic landscape, making him an attractive choice to the Robert E. Lee Chapter when commissioning an artist for its statue. In *The Key to the City of Houston*, Mary E. Bryan expressed her admiration for Amateis's design of

An allegorical figure representing the Spirit of the Confederacy, the conception being that, as the principles for which the Confederacy fought stand on natural rights, so the bronze figure representing its spirit should stand on natural rocks, entwined by the deathless ivy, strong and youthful, resting his arms on the downturned sword, clasping with one hand the palm of peace, which he reluctantly accepted, and with the other a bunch of laurel, which he so valiantly earned on the battle field [*sic*], he looks on the horizon, thoughtful of the future of the country.<sup>62</sup>



Fig. 1.1. *Spirit of the Confederacy* in Sam Houston Park, January 6, 2013. Photo courtesy of Brian Reading, Wikimedia Commons.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Bryan, "Robert E. Lee Chapter 186, United Daughters of the Confederacy," 140.





Figs.1.2 and 1.3. A profile view of *Spirit of the Confederacy* and a descriptive tablet that originally hung from the monument's granite base. The tablet reads, "The Spirit of the Confederacy | Erected by the Robert E. Lee Chapter N. 186 U.D.C. January 1908 | To all heroes of the South who fought for the principles of states [sic] rights." Photo courtesies of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center.

With *Spirit of the Confederacy*, Amateis conceived a design that recast the Confederacy's defeat in a triumphant light. In the spirit's hand, the laurel – a symbol of victory, success, fame, and prosperity – embodied the figure's overall representation of the Lost Cause myth.<sup>63</sup> Although historians debate the social function of the Lost Cause myth at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, rhetorician Amy Lynn Heyse summarizes it as a belief in "the Confederacy's moral and righteous victory against aggressive outside

<sup>63</sup> "Laurel Wreath/Crown Symbol, Its Meaning and History," Mythologian.net, <https://mythologian.net/laurel-wreath-crown-symbol-meaning-history/>.

sources despite their military defeat.” As Heyse articulates in a 2008 article, the myth holds that the Civil War began due to the North’s violation of states’ rights and uses “quasi-religious imagery” to frame the Confederates as a “chosen people” whose cause, regardless of defeat, was not really lost.<sup>64</sup>

The cost of commissioning this individualized monument to the defenders of the Lost Cause, as opposed to requesting a mass-produced statue commonly manufactured throughout the United States for poorer white communities, amounted to \$7,500 in 1908.<sup>65</sup> (By the 1990s, the Greater Houston Partnership estimated that this cost equated to \$120,000 in modern value, a total enhanced by the artist’s prestige.)<sup>66</sup> Members of the national UDC generally used a myriad of strategies to collect monument funds from the white community. For example, the UDC sponsored fundraisers, lobbied state representatives for funds, and even endorsed Confederate-themed souvenirs on the market (e.g., Confederate calendars, lithographs of Lee and his generals), from which the UDC received a portion of the profits.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, the Robert E. Lee Chapter solicited funds from Houston’s white community through donations and fundraisers. To raise \$1,7000 for *Spirit’s* unveiling ceremony, for example, Mrs. O. T. Holt, the entertainment committee chair, organized a baseball benefit in 1907, where Houston’s “Lean and Fat teams,” headed by team captains Clemens and Lubbock, respectively,

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<sup>64</sup> Amy Lynn Heyse, “The Rhetoric of Memory-Making: Lessons from the UDC’s Catechisms for Children,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2008): 415.

<sup>65</sup> For more on funding Confederate monuments, see Sarah Beetham, “Confederate Monuments: Southern Heritage or Southern Art?” *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2020).

<sup>66</sup> Correspondence from Artie Lee to Pam, n.d., Box 8, Folder 36, RG A 33 Houston Municipal Art Commission Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, TX.

<sup>67</sup> Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 56-58.

competed.<sup>68</sup> To encourage community involvement, the chapter also rewarded “stone buyers,” the name given to contributors who subscribed to leaflets priced at twenty cents apiece, by inscribing their names between the stones of granite beneath the monument.<sup>69</sup> Later, the first Houston chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy – a minor Confederate women’s organization that was not affiliated with either the UDC or the Robert E. Lee Chapter – donated \$100 to the monument fund upon disbanding after a “short existence.”<sup>70</sup>

Wealthier patrons also extended their assistance to the chapter. “In June 1899,” chapter president Elizabeth Russell Rodgers wrote in her biography of the organization, “George Herman [*sic*] [a Houston philanthropist and the namesake of Hermann Park] offered the Chapter, through Mrs. Margaret H. Foster, twenty acres of land lying within a few miles of Buffalo Bayou and fronting on Main Street, for a Confederate Park in which to place the monument.” The site, though “picturesque,” was deemed “too far out,” and the chapter eventually selected a “beautifully landscaped site overlooking Buffalo Drive” (now Allen Parkway). Rodgers also paid her gratitude to Mr. R. H. Downman of Herbernia Bank, New Orleans, Louisiana, who donated the Texas granite used for the monument's base.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Bryan, “Robert E. Lee Chapter 186, United Daughters of the Confederacy,” 140.

<sup>69</sup> “Spirit of the Confederacy: Monument Unveiling Will Be this Afternoon—Nine Years’ Work of Daughters of Confederacy—Well Arranged Program for Today,” n.d., Box 8, Folder 40, RG A 33 Houston Municipal Art Commission Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, TX.

<sup>70</sup> Bryan, “Robert E. Lee Chapter 186, United Daughters of the Confederacy,” 140.

<sup>71</sup> Rodgers, *History of the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy*, 2.

With a site selected, a monument design finalized, and funding secured, the Robert E. Lee chapter scheduled *Spirit of the Confederacy's* dedication ceremony on January 19, 1908. *Spirit's* unveiling coincided with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Confederate president Jefferson Davis's birth year, as well as the birth date of General Robert E. Lee, future president Katie Daffin explained in a 1908 *Houston Chronicle* article. "With one voice, in enthusiastic accord, let the members of our noble state organization give praise and honor to our beloved chieftain [Lee or Davis], who loved our cause, its principles, its truth and deep-seated rights and privileges better than he loved his own life," Daffin implored her readers.<sup>72</sup> The concurrence of *Spirit's* dedication ceremony with the birth year and birth date of men who, to Daffin, epitomized the Confederate cause suggests that the ceremony went beyond honoring living and dead veterans. Rather, the event revived the memory of leaders who had dedicated their lives to the "principles of states' rights" – an attitude worthy of the UDC chapter's continued remembrance, as noted on *Spirit's* plaque.

At three o' clock in the afternoon, *Spirit's* dedication ceremony commenced. A newspaper article informing the public of the event anticipated "[t]housands" of Houstonians and "hundreds" of out-of-town guests, many of whom arrived at the park by foot or horse carriage that "sunny afternoon."<sup>73</sup> Two of the chapter's most notable

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<sup>72</sup> "Lovers of Dixie: Reports Regarding Chapter and Auxiliary Work by U.D.C.," *Houston Chronicle*, March 15, 1908, 36.

<sup>73</sup> "Spirit of the Confederacy: Monument Unveiling Will Be this Afternoon—Nine Years' Work of Daughters of Confederacy—Well Arranged Program for Today," n.d., Box 8, Folder 40, RG A 33 Houston Municipal Art Commission Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, TX; "Unveiling in City Park, 1908," Wikiwand, [https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Spirit\\_of\\_the\\_Confederacy](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Spirit_of_the_Confederacy); "Amateis, Louis (1855-1913 American/Italian)," n.d., Box 8, Folder 36, RG A 33 Houston Municipal Art Commission Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, TX, 331.

invitees included Mrs. Cornelia Branch Stone of Galveston, then the president-general of the UDC, and Mrs. Joseph Dibrell of Seguin, the president of the Texas Division of the UDC.<sup>74</sup> The chapter also welcomed soldiers of Dick Dowling Camp; the men assembled at the entrance of Sam Houston Park before “march[ing] in a body from a gate to the monument” where “special seats” awaited them.<sup>75</sup> Apart from the various military companies in attendance – namely the “Houston cavalry, military rifles, and the Houston light guard” – a choir of children also arrived to serenade the crowd with “America (My Country, ‘Tis of Thee)” under the directorship of schoolteacher Bessie Hughes.<sup>76</sup> One *Houston Chronicle* reporter opined, “The unveiling was typical of patriotic gatherings” except for the spontaneous “singing of ‘America’” by the children.<sup>77</sup> In actuality, the inclusion of children was typical of the UDC’s unveiling ceremonies. It reflected the organization’s goal of propagating Lost Cause mythology to the next generation.<sup>78</sup>

The speakers at *Spirit’s* dedication ceremony filled their speeches with odes to the unparalleled bravery and patriotism of the Confederacy’s defenders. A transcript of

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<sup>74</sup> “Patriotic Effort Consummated in the “Spirit of the Confederacy,”” *Houston Chronicle*, January 19, 1908, 19.

<sup>75</sup> “Spirit of the Confederacy: Monument Unveiling Will Be this Afternoon—Nine Years’ Work of Daughters of Confederacy—Well Arranged Program for Today,” n.d., Box 8, Folder 40, RG A 33 Houston Municipal Art Commission Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, TX.

<sup>76</sup> “Patriotic Effort Consummated in the “Spirit of the Confederacy,”” *Houston Chronicle*, January 19, 1908, 19; “Spirit of the Confederacy: Monument Unveiling Will Be this Afternoon—Nine Years’ Work of Daughters of Confederacy—Well Arranged Program for Today,” n.d., Box 8, Folder 40, RG A 33 Houston Municipal Art Commission Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, TX.

<sup>77</sup> “Amateis, Louis (1855-1913 American/Italian),” n.d., Box 8, Folder 36, RG A 33 Houston Municipal Art Commission Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, TX, 332.

<sup>78</sup> Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 64-65.

the speeches, apparently printed by a newspaper outlet around the time of the ceremony, has been preserved by the Houston Metropolitan Research Center; furthermore, it is uncertain whether reporters recorded what they heard, received copies of the text from the speakers themselves, or documented the information another way. Regardless of their method of preservation, the speeches convey the highest regard for the soldiers, anticipating that *Spirit of the Confederacy* would perpetuate their memory into the future.

Mrs. Cornelia Branch Stone, who was responsible for placing a wreath of laurels on the statue, spoke to the crowd first:

In the unveiling ceremony of this monument “to the heroes of the South,” there rises before our vision a mighty host of men who stand in the history of this American Republic, for all that is heroic in honor [and] valor...being at many times almost reduced to starvation, poorly clad and in nearly all cases controlled in battle by largely superior numbers. No army ever had such leaders and no leader such an army. In contemplating this beautiful tribute, erected by the R. E. Lee Chapter, Houston, Tex., Daughters of the Confederacy, who, in honoring these heroes have honored themselves, a galaxy of glorious names stands out in command of the men, who were ready to die for the principles of

constitutional government and individual rights, names that thrill one to the greatest depths of patriotic ardor.<sup>79</sup>

Stone's praise of the Confederate soldiers' willingness to "die for the principles of constitutional government" is one of the most salient components of the Lost Cause myth for the *Spirit of the Confederacy* monument. Although painted as rebellious by northern propaganda during the Civil War, former Confederates argued that "they acted morally and legally under the Constitution," to quote Foster.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps drawing from the lore of the American Revolution, they claimed the right to fight an abusive northern power by seceding to maintain their states' rights – those "natural" rights on which the monument stands, as Amateis tried to convey.

Stone went on to describe the Confederates in mythic-like terms. "Lee, the matchless leader and Christian gentleman; Stonewall Jackson, the invincible military genius; John B. Gordon, the Chivalrous...and a host of other great Generals unequaled in any army of ancient or modern times, together with the noted cavalry leaders, all ranking with Murat, the greatest of Napoleon's cavalry officers..."<sup>81</sup> On top of Stone's run-on sentences, which gave her commendation of the Confederacy a sense of

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<sup>79</sup> "Women of South – Monument Unveiled by Daughters of the Confederacy of Houston | To Heroes of South | Tributes by President of United Daughters of Confederacy and Others | Capt. Hutcheson the Orator | Spirit of the Confederacy Beautifully Typified in Granite and Bronze," n.d., Box 8, Folder 40, RG A 33 Houston Municipal Art Commission Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, TX.

<sup>80</sup> Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 23.

<sup>81</sup> "Women of South – Monument Unveiled by Daughters of the Confederacy of Houston | To Heroes of South | Tributes by President of United Daughters of Confederacy and Others | Capt. Hutcheson the Orator | Spirit of the Confederacy Beautifully Typified in Granite and Bronze," n.d., Box 8, Folder 40, RG A 33 Houston Municipal Art Commission Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, TX.

breathlessness (if not endlessness), there was not a single negative epithet in her Confederate deification.<sup>82</sup>

By contrast, J. C. Hutcheson – a former Confederate captain – did not shy away from speaking honestly about the Confederacy’s defeat. “The ‘jubilant song of the victor’ has stirred many a muse to lofty song, while the ‘lowly and the humble, the beaten, who fell over in the strife,’ have rarely found a bard to chant their devotion to duty and truth,” he said. “Immortality pertains to the heroic and the unselfish, and not more surely will yonder sun with golden keys unlock the portals of the dawn and wake to life and find a sleeping world than will historian and bard render than honor which is their due to those whose memories we are here to pay tribute, who strove yet failed, who reached for the garland of victory only to grasp the cypress of defeat.”<sup>83</sup> Here, Hutcheson shifted the audience’s attention from the heroes of “matchless valor” that Stone lionized to the lesser-known, the downtrodden, and the defeated. Perhaps speaking from the perspective of a Confederate captain, he embraced the reality of failure, casting the dead as all the more in need of recognition.

Hutcheson concluded his speech with a reference to the bard mentioned above.

Hutcheson predicted that the historian and the bard would do as the sun does one day:

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<sup>82</sup> Heyse, “The Rhetoric of Memory-Making,” 416. Heyse identifies a rhetorical strategy the UDC used called *oversimplification*, which made Confederate history more digestible for children by presenting “complex historical and political events in uncomplicated ways” (416). Given that children were present during the ceremony, it would be interesting to consider what impact their presence had on her choice of words.

<sup>83</sup> “Women of South – Monument Unveiled by Daughters of the Confederacy of Houston | To Heroes of South | Tributes by President of United Daughters of Confederacy and Others | Capt. Hutcheson the Orator | Spirit of the Confederacy Beautifully Typified in Granite and Bronze,” n.d., Box 8, Folder 40, RG A 33 Houston Municipal Art Commission Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, TX.



Cast light on a now invisible group of defeated soldiers whose names are often not chanted in victory as those who are triumphant. He declared that the future bard would reignite the memory of the forgotten by striking a tune in their honor. To Hutcheson, the monument served as the inspiration for, and a reminder to create, that tune. “[M]any a bard with heart profoundly stirred and soul aflame with frenzy of exultant song, sweeping very dactyls from quivering strings, will chant the anthem of their glorious deeds, in richer, rarer, sweeter song than singer hath yet sung.”<sup>84</sup>

After Hutcheson’s speech, the Hood’s Texas Brigade Juniors showered *Spirit of the Confederacy* with flowers, accompanied by the school children’s rendition of “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee.”

## CONCLUSION

As the United Daughters of the Confederacy and their guests paid homage to the Confederacy’s combatants, they failed to acknowledge that the South’s primary motivation for seceding from the Union was to protect the institution of slavery. Any memory of the sectional disputes that erupted over the fate of slavery in the United States – a conflict exacerbated by the country’s territorial expansion throughout the mid-1800s – made no appearance in the chapter’s description of the Confederate legacy. Instead, *Spirit of the Confederacy* manifested the Robert E. Lee Chapter’s selective remembrance of the Civil War, glorifying the members’ Confederate ancestors’ chivalry, integrity, and patriotism in the city of Houston, where, as the second chapter

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

will examine, Jim Crow was becoming increasingly prevalent. As Kristy Coleman, the CEO of the American Civil War Museum in Richmond, Virginia, said of Lost Cause adherents in 2018, “They have to believe that they fought for something greater than the continued subjugation of another human being.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> “Monumental lies,” Reveal, December 8, 2018, <http://revealnews.org/podcast/monumental-lies/>.

## CHAPTER 2 – BLACK FREEDMEN AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM MOVEMENT

After the Civil War and the prohibition of slavery, Black freedmen and freedwomen, intellectuals, and migrants in Texas and across the United States worked to rebuild their lives and sense of social, cultural, and historical value. John E. Fleming, former director of the National African American Museum in Wilberforce, Ohio indicates that from the time the Atlantic slave trade began, slaveholders prioritized erasing “all vestiges of African culture that would threaten the hegemony of the white population.” By forcing Africans to learn European languages, outlawing “ceremonial rituals and dance,” and prohibiting reading and writing – “perhaps the most effective measure that limited cultural retention” – slaveholders tried to “exercise complete social and economic control” over the lives of enslaved people.<sup>1</sup> Africans resisted cultural erasure by preserving and adapting practices that did not appear to threaten the institution of slavery when observed by slaveholders. Examples included mixing European lyrics into their music and incorporating Christian teachings into “their songs, dances, and spiritual traditions.”<sup>2</sup>

Just as slavery and resistance comingled to produce African American culture before the Civil War, Black Americans created many cultural contributions seen as worthy of preservation by future museum directors during and after Reconstruction. To historian Scott L. Stabler, freedmen who migrated to Houston did “not [wait] for others

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<sup>1</sup> John E. Fleming, “The Impact of Social Movements on the Development of African American Museums,” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 45-46.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 45.

to solve their problems.” Instead, they filled Houston’s Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards and constructed Black churches, schools, and political organizations.<sup>3</sup> Of course, these spaces were not always easily navigable. In the early twentieth century, Jim Crow laws physically separated the Black and white “races” in public transportation, stores, restaurants, and other establishments. Theoretically, historian Tyina L. Steptoe explains, these laws continued the spatial separation of “slave” and “master” established under slavery, “enforce[ing] white supremacy by relegating nonwhites to substandard spaces.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, in response to these legal divisions, Steptoe argues that Black Texans used space and popular culture to craft an “alternate geography,” or cultural enclave, in the Jim Crow society.<sup>5</sup> The freedmen established parlors, restaurants, and stores that promoted the community’s economic autonomy; they popularized East Texas blues, which used guitar licks to “vocaliz[e]...black sadness and sorrow”; and they produced newspapers like C. F. Richardson’s *Informer*, which used “black vernacular traditions imported from the countryside.”<sup>6</sup>

Despite Black Americans’ success in constructing post-war communities, Black intellectuals across the United States still sought to combat racist beliefs that African Americans risked internalizing. “During the Jim Crow era,” African American historian Fath Ruffins reports, “[M]any white American racists, scientific or otherwise, justified

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<sup>3</sup> Scott L. Stabler, “Free Men Come to Houston: Blacks During Reconstruction,” *The Houston Review* 3, no. 1 (2005): 43.

<sup>4</sup> Tyina L. Steptoe, *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 9-10. Steptoe quotes the historian Stephanie Camp in this parallel, who asserted, “At the heart of the process of enslavement was a spatial impulse: to locate in plantation space and to control, indeed to determine, their movements and activities” (9-12).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 46, 51, 57.

racial prejudice and discrimination on the basis that Black people were an intellectually and culturally inferior race...They argued that Negroes came from a continent with no history and that even the limited cultural accomplishments they had attained in Africa had been eliminated during enslavement.”<sup>7</sup> In response, Black intellectuals like Carter G. Woodson and philosopher Allain Locke dedicated themselves to cultivating a “Negro Canon,” a well-researched compilation of Blacks’ artistic and historical achievements designed to counteract white supremacy and uplift the Black community’s sense of value.<sup>8</sup> Woodson, the proverbial “father of Black history,” established the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH), now the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), in Chicago in 1935; he also cooperated with churches, educational organizations, and other groups to deliver scholarship on Black contributions to American life to local communities.<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, Locke, who graduated from Harvard College in 1907, garnered white liberal philanthropic support for Black artists, many of whom became prominent during the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston.<sup>10</sup> Locke believed that “Negro artists needed to embrace the cultural production of ordinary Black people” and take advantage of “the time and resources to hone their artistic skills,” Fath Ruffins writes.<sup>11</sup>

With time, African American museums, many directed by individuals inspired by the “Negro Canon,” grew in number across the nation, coinciding with the rise of the

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<sup>7</sup> Fath Davis Ruffins, “Building Homes for Black History: Museum Founders, Founding Directors, and Pioneers, 1915-95,” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (August 2018): 15.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 15-18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

civil rights movement, Black Power movement, and an increasing advocacy for Black studies courses in America's universities. Black museum pioneers of the 1950s and 1960s propelled the movement by desiring to combat "the internalized belief that Black people [are] intellectually inferior, with no significant history or culture."<sup>12</sup> For example, following World War II, Margaret Burroughs, a key Black museum pioneer, established what came to be known as the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago in 1961. In the spirit of preceding Black intellectuals, the DuSable Museum sought "to preserve and interpret the experiences and achievements of people of African descent."<sup>13</sup> Later, several museums appeared in the DuSable's wake, including the International Afro-American Museum in Detroit founded by Charles H. Wright in 1965, and the National Center of Afro-American Artists (NCAA) by Elma Lewis in 1968. Interested in the African diaspora at large, the NCAA strove "to preserve and foster the cultural arts heritage of Black peoples worldwide."<sup>14</sup>

Historian John Fleming speculates that African Americans' fight for equality during the mid-twentieth century (e.g., the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, Freedom Rides in 1961, Black Power movement) instilled a "new consciousness" within the African American community to document, preserve, and present Black contributions in a positive light.<sup>15</sup> In two surveys conducted by the Association of African American Museums (AAAM) in 2008 and 2017, the number of African American museums

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 13–43.

<sup>13</sup> Fleming, "The Impact of Social Movements on the Development of African American Museums," 55–56.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

surged by twenty-nine museums in the 1970s. An additional thirty-eight museums appeared in the 1980s, followed by sixty-two museums in the 1990s.<sup>16</sup>

More significantly, the proliferation of African American museums epitomized the fight to empower Black communities. In her book *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement*, public historian Andrea Burns titles her first chapter “When ‘Civil Rights Are Not Enough.’” The title refers to words spoken by International Afro-American Museum founder Charles Wright who prioritized elevating Black Americans’ sense of worth over achieving legal victories, in 1965. As Wright explained, “We [the museum] are trying to erase 350 years of dehumanizing brain washing [*sic*] and civil rights are not enough. Something has to occur inside the Negro to erase those self-degrading ideas that he has been taught.” That “something,” necessarily more concrete and visible than the abstract concept of “civil rights for all,” could be the mission of a black history museum.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, many African American museums made it their mission to help the communities they served overcome the psychological degradation of slavery and racism. For example, in a 1967 *Chicago Daily Defender* advertisement, the DuSable Museum called upon community members to donate artifacts found at home, including “Negro family relics from slavery time,” books, photos, and costumes. Apart from attracting attention to the fledgling museum, this initiative “informed audiences that the ordinary material objects and artifacts of African American history—whether

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<sup>16</sup> Jeff Hayward and Christine Larouche, “The Emergence of the Field of African American Museums,” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (2018): 165.

<sup>17</sup> Andrea A. Burns, “When ‘Civil Rights Are Not Enough,’” in *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 29.

photographs or manumission papers or quilts—were in fact objects of immense power, worthy of inclusion in a museum.”<sup>18</sup> By documenting, preserving, and reinterpreting African American material culture, museums countered white supremacist narratives in the service of local Black communities.

## CONCLUSION

As will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, Houston experienced its own Black museum movement. The Houston Museum of African American Culture (HMAAC) joined a legacy of institutions that flourished in response to the Black community’s thirst for empowerment – a reaction to the wounds caused by slavery and perpetuated by racism and Jim Crow laws. Furthermore, HMAAC has confronted the Confederacy’s fight for states’ rights, which Chapter 1 explained meant the right to keep enslaved Africans as property. The following chapters examine HMAAC’s history and how it has engaged with the Confederate monument *Spirit of the Confederacy*, which it acquired in 2020. They shed light on the role of public funding in elevating or discouraging African American and Confederate narratives in public museums and Civil War historical sites. Although HMAAC recognizes that Black Americans have been victimized by slavery, Jim Crow, and more recent injustices like police brutality, it focuses on how communities can use *Spirit of the Confederacy* as an impetus to take action against police brutality, white supremacy, and economic segregation.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 22.



# **CHAPTER 3 – THE FOUNDING OF THE HOUSTON MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE AND THE CONFEDERATE MONUMENT DEBATE**

## **FOUNDING THE HOUSTON MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE**

The Houston Museum of African American Culture (HMAAC) has grown into a nationally recognized institution since opening in 2012. Currently, the museum boasts two floors for exhibitions, one gallery dedicated to native Houstonian and African American artist Bert L. Long, Jr., an alcove for showing documentaries, and a large room on the second floor with the words “BIG Thoughts Transform People” printed in white on the wall. Self-proclaimed to be the “most visited African American” establishment in the city with 50,000 annual visitors, HMAAC’s success lies in its multicultural vision, use of contemporary art, and community-oriented perspective.<sup>1</sup> “We’re helping to define an incredibly diverse and multifaceted community of people of color in Houston,” the museum’s chief executive officer, John Guess, Jr., told the *Houston Chronicle* in 2012. “The African-American artists we bring in transcend race, as it should be.”<sup>2</sup> By exploring historical and contemporary themes, HMAAC highlights

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<sup>1</sup> “HMAAC White Paper Addendum Today and Future,” 1, (provided courtesy of John Guess, Jr.).

<sup>2</sup> Molly Glentzer, “A museum forges ahead, ideas ablaze,” *Houston Chronicle*, March 25, 2012, 8.

the “African American experience while informing the wider community of how much that experience is shared” by people of all backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

Towards the end of the twentieth century, local advocates for an African American museum began pointing to the rich history of Houston’s Black community. When African American freedmen migrated to the city following the Civil War, they constructed enclaves for Black families, businesses, and institutions in the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards.<sup>4</sup> Settlements such as Freedmen’s Town and establishments like Antioch Baptist Church provided more than practical services for self-sustainability following enslavement. More significantly, they represented what historian Tyina L. Steptoe called the Black community’s “collective sense of shared history” in slavery and migration.<sup>5</sup>

Due to the expansion of manufacturing jobs during the two world wars, which drew many Black Americans to cities with war production facilities, Houston’s Black population swelled to 124,760 residents by 1950.<sup>6</sup> However, despite African Americans’ large numerical and cultural presence, segregation prohibited them from accessing Houston’s fine arts scene well into the mid-twentieth century. For example, in 1950, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) denied admission to African American muralist John T. Biggers, founder of the art department at Texas Southern University

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<sup>3</sup> “HMAAC - Sense the Possibilities!” 2011-2012, Box 8, Folder 96, Bert L. Long, Jr. Papers, Special Collections, M.D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries, Houston, TX, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Tyina L. Steptoe, *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Bernadette Pruitt, “Beautiful People: Community Agency, Work, and the Great Migration Phenomenon in Houston, Texas, 1900-1941,” The Historical Society, June 5, 2008, 7, <https://www.bu.edu/historic/conference08/Pruitt.pdf>.

(TSU). Although his conte crayon submission, *The Cradle*, won the MFAH's 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Exhibition of Houston Artists, the museum barred him from attending his own award ceremony, as it restricted admission of Blacks solely to Thursdays.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Black Houstonians typically avoided the MFAH "except for those who worked as maids tending to the children of museum patrons," according to African American *Houston Chronicle* writer Bob Lee.<sup>8</sup>

It was not until 1995 that the MFAH raised \$500,000 to mount, present, and prepare Biggers' latest work, *Art of John Biggers: View from the Upper Room*.<sup>9</sup> Yet, to some observers, this gesture was insufficient. Remembering how Biggers and his staff once struggled to train aspiring artists at TSU with limited resources, Lee argued that surely, \$500,000 could be invested in constructing a museum that contributed financially and culturally toward the Black community. As an African American himself, Lee pointed to books, letters, memorabilia, and art Black Houstonians preserved from their ancestors, items that would be "welcomed in the collection of Houston's African American Museum."<sup>10</sup> As a metropolis, Lee insisted, the time had

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<sup>7</sup> Pete Gershon, *Collision: The Contemporary Art Scene in Houston, 1972-1985* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2018), 396.

<sup>8</sup> Bob Z. Lee, "Houston Deserves its own African-American Museum," *Houston Chronicle*, June 18, 1995, 57. Peter C. Marzio, director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), corrected Lee's assertion that "less than 30 years ago from [1995], African-Americans were not allowed admission to the museum." Marzio argues that "African-Americans did attend the Museum of Fine Arts on specified days and times," a policy that ended forty-two years prior to 1995. See Peter C. Marzio, "Art exhibit is defended," *Houston Chronicle*, June 23, 1995, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Lee, "Houston Deserves its own African-American Museum," 57; Marzio, "Art exhibit is defended," 31.

<sup>10</sup> Lee, "Houston Deserves its own African-American Museum," 57.

come for Houston to match cities that had already established museums “dedicated to ethnic history” around the country.<sup>11</sup>

Although Houston hosted a handful of Black art galleries in the 1970s, such as The Adept on Binz Street and the Black Art Gallery on Dowling Street (now Emancipation Avenue), its first attempt to establish a museum focused on Black art came in 1988 under Dr. Robert Galloway, M.D.<sup>12</sup> Joined by “art curator Alivia Wardlaw, City Councilman Judson Robinson and art dealer Eugene Foney,” Galloway provided space for the African American Heritage Museum, spotlighting artwork by TSU teachers and students in St. Joseph’s Medical Plaza Building on Crawford Street.<sup>13</sup> However, it closed within two years after failing to pay its \$800 rent. Galloway cited a lack of visibility and inadequate space as contributing factors to the museum’s demise.<sup>14</sup>

Efforts to establish a Black museum reignited in 1995 when middle school teacher Rhonda Burnett began planning the creation of an African American Heritage Museum (which had no relation to the previous one established by Galloway). Having amassed artifacts from antique shops and garage sales, Burnett sought to turn a former church on the corner of Almeda Road into a museum with interactive exhibits where visitors could follow African Americans’ struggle “through slavery, through Reconstruction and civil rights.” In 1998, her dream nearly came to fruition when Burnett and her fellow board members opened a NationsBank account for

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> “Art,” *Space City*, June 15, 1971, 20 (Provided by courtesy of Special Collections, M.D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries, Houston, TX.).

<sup>13</sup> Patricia C. Johnson, “African-heritage museum loses medial-building home,” *Houston Chronicle*, September 13, 1990, 80.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

public donations. However, the \$100,000 raised by the board as of January 14, 1998, fell short of the \$700,000 needed to purchase the site.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, with a vision to make Houston a “destination” while preserving African American contributions to the city, Houston’s first Black mayor, Lee Brown, appointed a committee to head the development of an African American art museum in 1999.<sup>16</sup> Chaired by banker Gerald Smith, and with board members including project developer Irene Johnson, Reverend Bill Lawson, and other prominent Black Houstonians, the board set out to create a contemporary museum that charted the evolution of African American culture in Houston.<sup>17</sup> With a genealogy center, a performing arts theater, and ample gallery space in their plans, the members began fundraising for the anticipated \$30 million project.<sup>18</sup> In 2001, the *Houston Chronicle* reported the donation of \$400,000 from corporations like Enron, Compaq Computer Corporation, and Chase Bank to the board.<sup>19</sup> With the succeeding mayor Bill White’s support, the city also contributed \$2 million as part of White’s \$4.04 billion capital improvement plan in 2004.<sup>20</sup> The project struggled to materialize until 2009, when John Guess, Jr. was recruited as HMMAC’s

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<sup>15</sup> Eric Berger, “She dreams of a museum for blacks,” *Houston Chronicle*, December 15, 1997, 16-17; K. Pica Kahn, “Officials look to open African-American museum,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 14, 1998, 206.

<sup>16</sup> Mayor Lee Brown, interview by Jane Ely, April 30, 2008, Mayor Bill White Collection, Houston Oral History Project, Houston Public Library Digital Archives; Kristen Mack, “Brown has focus, funds set on a pair of projects,” *Houston Chronicle*, August 25, 2003, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Kristen Mack, “Brown has focus, funds set on a pair of projects,” *Houston Chronicle*, August 25, 2003, 4; Ron Nissimov, “City aid for black-museum debated: Council critics question fairness of funding plan,” *Houston Chronicle*, September 9, 2004, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Shelby Hodge, “Plan starts to gain momentum for African-American museum,” *Houston Chronicle*, October 10, 2001, 57.

<sup>19</sup> Salatheia Bryant, “African-American museum gathers support, money, ideas,” *Houston Chronicle*, April 29, 2001, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Ron Nissimov, “Black museum funding passes,” *Houston Chronicle*, September 16, 2004, 29.

chief executive officer and purchased a building for the new museum at 4807 Caroline Street in Houston's Museum District.<sup>21</sup>

A native Houstonian, John Guess, Jr., made forays in the arts and in international business before becoming HMAAC's CEO in 2009. As the manager of a mayoral campaign in Maryland, the first Black representative for Chase Bank in Brazil, a stockbroker at Merrill Lynch, and a filmmaker, Guess fit the description of a man who "didn't elect to do one simple thing," but "many things."<sup>22</sup> True to his artistic involvement, Guess also sat on the boards of the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (CAM), the Houston Arts Alliance, and the MFAH.

Ironically, Guess entered the museum scene long before 2009 as a developer repurposing the Gregory School, one of the first schools established for freedmen in Houston. In 2000, Mayor Brown planned to use the school as an archival center and for affordable housing, acknowledging how rising housing prices in nearby areas forced out longtime residents of Freedmen's Town.<sup>23</sup> Initially, City Council and community activists supported this initiative, especially when the federal government granted Houston \$2 million for the project. However, in 2002, the Texas Historical Commission blocked Brown's proposal to construct apartments on top of the former school building, constructed in 1926.<sup>24</sup> While Brown renounced his intent to develop an archival museum

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<sup>21</sup> Glentzer, "A museum forges ahead, ideas ablaze," 8.

<sup>22</sup> John Guess and Charles Henry Rowell, "An Interview with John Guess," *Callaloo* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 415; John Guess, Jr., interview with Morgan Thomas, November 12, 2020, UH - Oral History.

<sup>23</sup> Rachel Graves, "\$1 million goes to Freedmen's Town," *Houston Chronicle*, October 24, 2000, 17; Rachel Graves, "Neglected area now center of attention," *Houston Chronicle*, October 21, 2000, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Graves, "\$1 million goes to Freedmen's Town," 17; Rachel Graves, "Gregory School won't be a museum after all," *Houston Chronicle*, March 9, 2002, 1.

in the face of criticism, Guess, who submitted the housing proposal as a real estate consultant, did not.<sup>25</sup> “My dream was to make it a museum that told the African-American story in the Houston area, and I could think of no better place than where these folks originated their culture,” he told the *Houston Chronicle*.<sup>26</sup>

Although Guess later mused that “creating a museum wasn’t on his bucket list,” he emerged at HMAAC’s helm seven years later with the same vision he expressed in 2002.<sup>27</sup> The building he selected – secured through John Guess’ own real estate agency, Guess Group – initially needed work, as it had an unpaved parking lot, no security system, and floors in disrepair.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, Guess focused his efforts on recruiting multi-medium and state-of-the-art exhibitions, asserting, “We are not American history through an African American lens...We [are] a multicultural conversation on race geared towards a common future.”<sup>29</sup> Before the museum officially opened in 2012, Danielle Burns, a curator at HMAAC and the African American Library at the Gregory School, organized *Roux* in 2011: a printmaking exhibit by African American women focused on the relationship between traditional storytelling and handmade objects.<sup>30</sup> Apart from exhibiting the visual arts, HMAAC also drew a diverse crowd by hosting

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<sup>25</sup> Graves, “Gregory School won’t be a museum after all,” 2.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid,

<sup>27</sup> Molly Glentzer, “Museum steps up for Kinsey Collection: African-American culture exhibit displays the good and the bad,” *Houston Chronicle*, September 14, 2014, 98.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid; John Guess, Jr., interview with Morgan Thomas, November 12, 2020, UH - Oral History.

<sup>29</sup> John Guess, Jr., interview with Morgan Thomas, November 12, 2020, UH - Oral History.

<sup>30</sup> “Danielle Burns, Curator at the Houston Museum of African American Culture and the African American Archival Library at the Gregory School,” 2011-2012, Box 8, Folder 96, Bert L. Long, Jr. Papers, Special Collections, M.D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries, Houston, TX, 19; “Douglas Britt, “History, contemporary culture meet at new African-American museum: HMAAC uses social media, programs to attract its multicultural audiences,” *Houston Chronicle*, May 22, 2011, 11.

turntablist DJ Spooky, who meshed “old school and new school sounds” to create a “sonic fiction landscape” the same year.<sup>31</sup> Achieving the same inclusive outreach with presentations of *The Vagina Monologues* and performances by electronic vocalist Pamela Z., HMAAC solidified its appeal to a multicultural audience while exploring different avenues of artistic expression as a young institution.<sup>32</sup>

As HMAAC developed its exhibitions on site, Guess also sought to extend its services throughout the city. Before opening HMAAC’s building to the public, Guess was already offering the museum’s programs to places like the Menil Collection, SHAPE Community Center, the Gregory School, and the MFAH.<sup>33</sup> By engaging so many facets of the Houston community, Guess noted that HMAAC was purposefully including “‘the culture of our city’ outside of the simple confines of [the] building.”<sup>34</sup> The museum’s community involvement later extended into Black neighborhoods and the Texas Art for Justice in 2018, an activity that hinted at HMAAC’s advocacy for social justice beyond its walls.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Conversation in the Drawing Room,” 2011-2012, Box 8, Folder 96, Bert L. Long, Jr. Papers, Special Collections, M.D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries, Houston, TX, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Douglas Britt, “History, contemporary culture meet at new African-American museum: HMAAC uses social media, programs to attract its multicultural audiences,” *Houston Chronicle*, May 22, 2011, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Note that Guess did not specify the types of programs HMAAC hosted in its space and others in this article. See Britt, “History, contemporary culture meet at new African-American museum: HMAAC uses social media, programs to attract its multicultural audiences,” *Houston Chronicle*, May 22, 2011, 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Houston Museum of African American Culture, “Texas Art For Justice at HMAAC,” March 14, 2019, YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygpVF--V7FQ&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygpVF--V7FQ&feature=emb_title); Aswad Walker, “Texas Art for Justice Forum,” *Houston Defender Network*, July 16, 2018, <https://defendernetwork.com/celebrate/faces-houston-events/texas-art-for-justice-forum/>.



When HMAAC officially opened in 2012, its exhibitions explored the intersections between race, gender, sexual orientation, and other demographics. Events such as a Contemporary Texas Latino Artists exhibit curated by Benito Huerta in 2013 and QFest, an LGBTQ+ film festival in 2014, reflected HMAAC's attempt to insert itself into the city's multicultural scene.<sup>36</sup> Diverse crowds also attended the museum in 2017 to engage in public forums on Barack Obama's presidency and the voting patterns of white women behind President Donald Trump's election.<sup>37</sup> In its pursuit of facilitating candid conversations, HMAAC's diverse audiences exemplified the broad appeal of its inclusive mission.

At the same time, HMAAC spotlighted challenges – both contemporary and historical – unique to the African American experience. In 2012, HMAAC hosted *The Ballad of Emmett Till*, directed by Ifa Bayeza. The show used theatrical shadow play to narrate Till's life before his 1955 murder for allegedly whistling at a white woman while visiting Mississippi.<sup>38</sup> Two years following the performance, in 2014, HMAAC invited two Los Angeles philanthropists to showcase the Kinsey Collection, which exhibits primary artifacts documenting African Americans' "struggle for freedom and equality."<sup>39</sup> The Kinsey Collection items shown at HMAAC, which ranged from shackles sized for a child to a letter detailing a trade in which an enslaved person was

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<sup>36</sup> "QFest," *Houston Chronicle*, July 24, 2014, 62; "Contemporary Texas Latino Artists," *Houston Chronicle*, August 18, 2013, 91.

<sup>37</sup> "Great Debate 2017: Did Barack Obama's Presidency Improve the Lives of African Americans?" HMAAC - Community Forum, <https://hmaac.org/community-forum>; "I Grabbed Them By The Votes: Why Did 53% of White Women Vote for Donald Trump 2017," HMAAC - Community Forum, <https://hmaac.org/community-forum>.

<sup>38</sup> Everett Evans, "Emmett Till brought to life at Ensemble," *Houston Chronicle*, February 4, 2012, 45.

<sup>39</sup> Glentzer, "Museum steps up for Kinsey Collection," 2.

exchanged for ownership of a horse stable, encapsulated the history of slavery both nationally and locally.<sup>40</sup>

## **SPIRIT OF THE CONFEDERACY AND THE MONUMENT DEBATE**

HMAAC's newest addition is the culmination of a more recent debate between that of "heritage" versus "hate" surrounding symbols of the Confederacy. Following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers in 2020, HMAAC adopted the *Spirit of the Confederacy* monument, which stood in the city's Sam Houston Park since its installation in 1908. After Floyd's death, a statement released by HMAAC to the public predicted that granting the monument to Houston's first African American cultural museum would be a sensitive event for the Black community.<sup>41</sup> Yet, restating its commitment to facilitating necessary conversations about race, HMAAC used *Spirit* to confront the nation's legacy of racial injustice and promote healing through "truth telling."<sup>42</sup>

Before *Spirit's* relocation, historians and ordinary Americans alike contemplated the future of Confederate monuments remaining in public spaces. In her book *No Common Ground*, historian Karen L. Cox draws from the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) in estimating the number of Confederate monuments still standing in the United States at approximately 750 to 800.<sup>43</sup> To cite two definitions provided by Ellen Hunt, a

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> "HMAAC Receives Confederate Monument from the City of Houston," HMAAC, <https://hmaac.org/hmaac-receives-confederate-monument-from-the-city-of-houston>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Karen L. Cox, *No Common Ground* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 7.

contributor to the *Minnesota Journal of Law and Inequality*, monuments are “statues, plaques, street names, and buildings” and “serve to memorialize historic events and commemorate historic figures.” Confederate monuments are dedicated specifically “to the soldiers and supporters of the Confederate States of America during the American Civil War.”<sup>44</sup>

In 2017, a task force represented by the mayor’s office, Houston Parks and Recreation, and the Houston Public Library compiled a report contextualizing their recommendation for four Confederate items in the city’s possession: *Spirit of the Confederacy*, a marble statue of the Confederate commander Dick Dowling, and two paintings located in the Julia Ideson Library of Arlington House and Beauvoir House.<sup>45</sup> In the report, it cited the shooting at the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E) Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, as the two debate-provoking tragedies that forced national and local conversations about monuments to become mainstream.

The first event occurred on June 17, 2015, when Dylann Roof, a twenty-one-year-old white supremacist – a person who believes in the inherent superiority of the “white race” – entered the historically black Emmanuel A.M.E. Church. According to CNN reporters Keith O’Shea, Darran Simon, and Holly Yan, “The Bible study group welcomed him and gave him a sheet with religious verses. He stayed with them for at

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<sup>44</sup> Ellen Hunt, “What is a Confederate Monument?: An Examination of Confederate Monuments in the Context of Compelled Speech and Government Speech Doctrines,” *Minnesota Journal of Law & Inequality* 37, no. 2 (2019): 423, 425.

<sup>45</sup> *City of Houston Confederate Items Task Force Final Report* (March 2018), [https://mcusercontent.com/bbc8dea1a49ed98f626812405/files/ca0aeae1-2dd2-4ae7-bfe3-ed1d788f363d/Confederate\\_Items\\_Task\\_Force\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](https://mcusercontent.com/bbc8dea1a49ed98f626812405/files/ca0aeae1-2dd2-4ae7-bfe3-ed1d788f363d/Confederate_Items_Task_Force_Final_Report.pdf).

least 15 minutes.”<sup>46</sup> Suddenly, unleashing “70 rounds from a Glock .45-caliber pistol,” Roof shot and killed nine of the Black attendees as they stood and closed their eyes for prayer.<sup>47</sup> Eyewitness accounts provide a chilling window into the massacre. Journalist Emily Shapiro reported, “Amid the chaos and bloodshed,” the son of one mother in attendance, Tywanza Sanders, asked Roof, “Why are you doing this?” In the mother’s words, Roof answered, “‘I have to do this because y’all raping our women and taking over the world’...And that’s when [the gunman] put about five bullets in my son.”<sup>48</sup>

On June 18, authorities apprehended Roof at a traffic stop in Shelby, North Carolina.<sup>49</sup> The items discovered in his vehicle – a list of churches, a Confederate flag, a burned U.S. flag, a gun, an empty ammunition box, and a laser attachment – hinted at his motivations for committing the crime.<sup>50</sup> As reported by the SPLC, Roof committed this act of terror intending to start a “race war.” In the shooter’s words, “Someone had to take ‘drastic action’ to take back America from ‘stupid and violent’ African Americans.”<sup>51</sup> Photographs of Roof holding the Confederate battle flag, and one photo with a burning U.S. flag in his other hand, emerged. The photographs, which so clearly

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<sup>46</sup> Keith O’Shea, Darran Simon and Holly Yan, “Dylann Roof’s racist rants read in court,” *CNN*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/13/us/dylann-roof-murder-trial/index.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid; *Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy* (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.), 6.

<sup>48</sup> Emily Shapiro, “Key moments in Charleston church shooting case as Dylann Roof pleads guilty to state charges,” *ABC News*, April 10, 2017, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/key-moments-charleston-church-shooting-case-dylann-roof/story?id=46701033>.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> *Whose Heritage*, 6.

linked the murderous rampage with the Confederate flag, incited a grassroots movement to remove the Confederate emblem from public spaces.<sup>52</sup>

The United Daughters of the Confederacy, which this thesis examined in Chapter 1, has attempted to distance itself from violence apparently connected to the Confederate cause. As noted in a statement released by the organization's president general, "We are grieved that certain hate groups have taken the Confederate flag and other symbols as their own....The United Daughters of the Confederacy totally denounces any individual or group that promotes racial divisiveness or white supremacy. And we call on these people to cease using Confederate symbols for their abhorrent and reprehensible purposes."<sup>53</sup>

However, the connection between racially motivated violence and symbols of the Confederacy is not unique to Dylann Roof. On the contrary, his written "manifesto" echoes the very ideologies that rationalized African enslavement under the Confederacy and elsewhere in the United States. In one excerpt, he wrote, "Negroes have lower Iqs [sic], lower impulse control, and higher testosterone levels in generals [sic]. These three things alone are a recipe for violent behavior."<sup>54</sup> Roof's belief in the inherent bestiality of "negroes" harkens back to the dehumanization of non-Europeans by early scientists, whose "findings" were later repeated by imperialist governments and slaveholders. Take *The Anatomy of a Pygmie* (1708) by the anatomist William Tyson, who positioned

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<sup>52</sup> O'Shea, Simon and Yan, "Dylann Roof's racist rants read in court"; *Whose Heritage?*, 6.

<sup>53</sup> "Statement from the President General," United Daughters of the Confederacy, <https://hqudc.org/>.

<sup>54</sup> Michael E. Ruane, "A brief history of the enduring phony science that perpetuates white supremacy," *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/a-brief-history-of-the-enduring-phony-science-that-perpetuates-white-supremacy/2019/04/29/20e6aef0-5aeb-11e9-a00e-050dc7b82693\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/a-brief-history-of-the-enduring-phony-science-that-perpetuates-white-supremacy/2019/04/29/20e6aef0-5aeb-11e9-a00e-050dc7b82693_story.html).

the “pygmy,” or African, between ape and man, literally associating African ancestry with primates.<sup>55</sup> Though skeptical of racial hierarchies himself, the French naturalist Georges Cuvier also relegated those with “protruding jaws and thick lips” to “total barbarism” in 1827.<sup>56</sup> By similarly stereotyping Black Americans as bestial and racially inferior, southern slaveowners justified the need for control, using language Roof echoed in his 21st-century manifesto.

As the SPLC observed, Roof’s actions sparked “deep reflection”:

In what seemed like an instant, the South’s 150-year reverence for the Confederacy was shaken. Public officials responded to the national mourning and outcry by removing prominent public displays of its most recognizable symbol. It became a moment of deep reflection for a region where the Confederate flag is viewed by many white Southerners as an emblem of their heritage and regional pride despite its association with slavery, Jim Crow and the violent resistance to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore, the SPLC adds, “The [Emmanuel A.M.E. Church shooting] came amid a period of growing alarm about the vast racial disparities in our country.”<sup>58</sup> HMAAC has attempted to commentate on these same concerns in its own locality. For example, some of the museum’s exhibits have focused on police brutality as the Black

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<sup>55</sup> Sven Lindqvist, *“Exterminate All the Brutes:” One Man’s Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide* (New York: The New Press, 1992, 1996), 100.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>57</sup> *Whose Heritage?*, 6.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Lives Matter movement – formed in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012 – continued to emerge under the national spotlight.<sup>59</sup> In 2018, the museum dedicated an exhibit to Sandra Bland, an African American woman found dead in her jail cell after being arrested during a minor traffic stop that escalated. The exhibition prompted visitors to sit in a four-seated car and watch police dashcam footage, which showed the trooper “remov[ing] Bland from her vehicle and threaten[ing] her with a Taser.”<sup>60</sup> Guess curated the exhibit to “allow visitors to experience the many emotions that Bland felt on the day of her arrest.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, *Spirit* entered HMAAC’s possession as protests wracked the nation in response to George Floyd’s murder, which occurred at the hands of a police officer who knelt on his neck for almost nine minutes.

Two years after the Emmanuel A.M.E Church shooting, a white nationalist rally erupted in violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 12, 2017. Attracting racist, antisemitic, white nationalist, and white supremacist groups, the Unite the Right Rally converged upon the formerly named Robert E. Lee Park, now Emancipation Park, to protest the removal of a statue depicting the Confederate general.<sup>62</sup> Formal efforts to remove the monument began as early as 2016, when Wes Bellamy, a Charlottesville

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<sup>59</sup> “Black Lives Matter Movement,” Howard University, <https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/BLM>.

<sup>60</sup> Josh Watkins, “Remembering the Joy and Injustice of Sandra Bland,” *Houstonia*, February 23, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> “Unrest in Virginia: Clashes Over a Show of White Nationalism in Charlottesville Turn Deadly,” *TIME*, <https://time.com/charlottesville-white-nationalist-rally-clashes/>; *Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville Timeline* (Facing History and Ourselves, n.d.), [https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/Unite\\_the\\_Right\\_Rally\\_in\\_Charlottesville\\_Timeline.pdf](https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/Unite_the_Right_Rally_in_Charlottesville_Timeline.pdf).

city councilor, announced the city council's plans to appoint a commission to "discuss the issue." Bellamy's announcement occurred amid rising debates about Confederate symbols fueled by national events. In a move that ultimately fanned the flames of protest, the city council voted to remove the statue in February of 2017.<sup>63</sup>

To rally organizer Jason Kessler, described as a "relative newcomer to the white nationalist scene" by the *New York Times*, the decision to organize on August 12 was constitutionally justified. "'This is my First Amendment right,' Mr. Kessler said of the rally.... 'This is the right of every American to be able to peaceably assemble and speak their mind free of intimidation.'" <sup>64</sup> However, the rally exposed sentiments that ran deeper than mere disagreements between those who supported removal and those who opposed the ostensible erasure of southern heritage. Beginning on August 11, the University of Virginia witnessed hundreds of torch-bearing white nationalists who, upon gathering on the campus, chanted phrases such as, "White lives matter," "Jews will not replace us," and "Blood and soil," the last two of which are derived directly from Nazi rhetoric.<sup>65</sup> Then, on August 12, the situation escalated. Confronted by counter-protesters, demonstrators hailing from the alt-right, neo-Nazis, and Ku Klux Klan descended upon Emancipation Park. According to Facing History and Ourselves, an educational nonprofit organization, many brought "battle gear," "torches, weapons, shields, and flags with Nazi or Confederate insignia."<sup>66</sup> The event climaxed when a car

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<sup>63</sup> *Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville Timeline*; Jacey Fortin, "The Statue at the Center of Charlottesville's Storm," *The New York Times*, August 13, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Fortin, "The Statue at the Center of Charlottesville's Storm."

<sup>65</sup> *Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville Timeline*.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*



driven by twenty-two-year-old James Alex Fields, Jr. rammed into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing one and injuring several other persons.<sup>67</sup>

While Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe declared a state of emergency, President Donald Trump issued an address that admonished protesters and counter-protesters equally. Televised against a backdrop of star-spangled flags, he stated, “We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides...We have to come together as Americans with love for our nation and — I say this so strongly — true affection for each other.”<sup>68</sup> On August 15, President Trump drew criticism after claiming that, “You had some very bad people in that group [unspecified], but you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides.”<sup>69</sup> According to *USA Today*, Trump eventually admitted that “the neo-Nazis and the white nationalists” should “be condemned totally” when questioned by a reporter.<sup>70</sup> But as of this thesis, a transcript of his statement has been removed from The White House website.

For white supremacists to arrive in Charlottesville, many armed in battle gear, the Robert E. Lee monument’s removal offended something emblematic of their identity and cause. According to journalist Emma Green, who published “Why the

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<sup>67</sup> “Unrest in Virginia: Clashes Over a Show of White Nationalism in Charlottesville Turn Deadly”; *Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville Timeline*.

<sup>68</sup> CNN, “Trump addresses Charlottesville clashes (full),” August 12, 2017, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMQWJDVg8PA>.

<sup>69</sup> Glenn Kessler, “The ‘very fine people’ at Charlottesville: Who were they?” *The Washington Post*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/08/very-fine-people-charlottesville-who-were-they-2/>.

<sup>70</sup> Adrienne Dunn, “Fact check: Meme on Trump ‘very fine people’ quote contains inaccuracies,” *USA Today*, October 17, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/10/17/fact-check-trump-quote-very-fine-people-charlottesville/5943239002/>.

Charlottesville Marchers Were Obsessed With Jews” for *The Atlantic* in 2017, the demonstrators arrived not to defend the statue, but to assert “the legitimacy of ‘white culture’” and “the legacy of the Confederacy.” Green speculates that antisemitism “functions as a readily available language for all manner of bigotry”; phrases like “Jews will not replace us” give expression to a “yearning” for minority groups (e.g., Jews, Blacks) to stay in their place. “Universalized movements that aim to fight oppression against all peoples in all of their identities necessarily invite backlash from those who feel that they’re losing their place in society,” Green commentates.<sup>71</sup> Common among white supremacists, this “replacement theory” stems from the glorification of leaders who fought to preserve the subjugation of Black Americans through Confederate monuments.

Ultimately, Houston’s Task Force, established by Mayor Turner, determined that *Spirit’s* connection to slavery, Jim Crow, white resistance to the mid-twentieth-century civil rights movement, and its “perceived meaning for modern audiences” warranted the monument’s removal. Perhaps acknowledging political sensitivities, the task force also advised against destroying the *Spirit of the Confederacy* and *Dick Dowling* statues, leaving their fate to Mayor Turner.<sup>72</sup> According to John Guess, Jr., Turner “approached [Guess] offline” to ask if HMAAC would be prepared to take the Confederate monuments, emphasizing that Turner’s initial offer was plural. Given Turner’s

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<sup>71</sup> Emma Green, “Why the Charlottesville Marchers Were Obsessed With Jews,” *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/nazis-racism-charlottesville/536928/>.

<sup>72</sup> *City of Houston Confederate Items Task Force Final Report* (March 2018), 13, [https://mcusercontent.com/bbc8dea1a49ed98f626812405/files/ca0aeae1-2dd2-4ae7-bfe3-ed1d788f363d/Confederate\\_Items\\_Task\\_Force\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](https://mcusercontent.com/bbc8dea1a49ed98f626812405/files/ca0aeae1-2dd2-4ae7-bfe3-ed1d788f363d/Confederate_Items_Task_Force_Final_Report.pdf).

upcoming reelection campaign, Guess speculated that Turner's offer was motivated by an opponent's criticism of the task force for its inaction since releasing its 2018 report. Elsewhere, the Houston Endowment – a private foundation dedicated broadly to improving “quality of life for the residents of greater Houston” – was considering giving *Spirit* to the Texas Historical Commission.<sup>73</sup> Guess imagined that the commission would simply send the monument to a public park in Austin, Texas, a decision he believed would be of “no use to us” [either HMAAC or the community it served]. Opposed to the Houston Endowment's alternative, Guess accepted Mayor Turner's offer and turned to HMAAC's board for confirmation.<sup>74</sup>

“With the board, we had the same kinds of conversations you would [expect to] have about this,” Guess stated in 2021. Some members agreed to the prospect of acquiring a monument, whereas others opposed it. In response to the board members' disagreement, Guess pointed to the long-term benefits of taking ownership of a Confederate monument. The current rumblings of Holocaust and slavery deniers, he argued, necessitated a space to confront the “evidence” of these crimes against humanity. “Years later,” he concluded, “We can say, ‘Here is the evidence,’” that “evidence” being monuments to the pro-slavery Confederacy.<sup>75</sup>

With the board's consent, Guess proceeded to negotiate with the Houston Endowment to secure funding for *Spirit's* relocation. Despite Turner's alleged offer to give HMAAC multiple Confederate monuments, Guess preferred to take only *Spirit of*

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<sup>73</sup> “Houston Endowment | A Private Foundation for Greater Houston,” Houston Endowment, <https://www.houstonendowment.org/>.

<sup>74</sup> John Guess, Jr., interview with Morgan Thomas, November 15, 2021, UH – Oral History.

<sup>75</sup> John Guess, Jr., interview with Morgan Thomas, November 15, 2021, UH – Oral History.

*the Confederacy*. “Human histories are complex,” he said. “The spirit is not. That’s an ideology.”<sup>76</sup> Indeed, according to *Hyperallergic*, an online art publication, Guess agreed to take the statue “so long as it was a sculpture of ‘a philosophy and not a person’ – a work that would allow visitors to face the tenets of the racist movement without dealing with its individual representation.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, without attracting public attention, and under the supervision of local police, HMAAC transferred *Spirit of the Confederacy* onto its premises. Because the police raised security concerns about threats sparked by *Spirit’s* removal, the museum limited in-person viewing and constructed a tall wooden fence around the backyard to hide the monument from public view. It also erected a low rod iron gate around the building for precaution.<sup>78</sup>

Because *Spirit* does not depict an immediately recognizable historical figure, interpreting its image without historical context presents a challenge. In contrast to Houston’s marble statue of the Confederate commander Dick Dowling, onlookers have described *Spirit* as an “archangel,” “winged male,” and an “angel [standing] guard under the big oak at Sam Houston Park Downtown.”<sup>79</sup> With relaxed, body-length wings, crossed arms, and a furrowed brow, *Spirit* towers above the ground at twelve feet (at

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<sup>76</sup> John Guess, Jr., interview with Morgan Thomas, November 15, 2021, UH – Oral History.

<sup>77</sup> Valentina Di Liscia, “At This Museum of African American Culture, Displaying a Confederate Statue Is a ‘Part of Healing,’” *Hyperallergic*, August 31, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/583649/houston-museum-of-african-american-culture/>.

<sup>78</sup> John Guess, Jr., interview with Morgan Thomas, November 15, 2021, UH – Oral History.

<sup>79</sup> “Texas Historical Commission, The State Agency for Historic Preservation | Information Specific to Monument #1,” n.d., Box 8, Folder 36, RG A 33 Houston Municipal Art Commission Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library (hereinafter HMAAC, HMRC), 1; “Artwork, Continued from Page 33A,” *Houston Chronicle* excerpt, n.d., Box 8, Folder 36, RG A 33, HMAAC, HMRC; “Save the Spirit of the Confederacy! It’s your chance to rescue an angel,” February 1995 issue by the Confederate Museum in Richmond, Texas, Box 8, Folder 36, RG A 33, HMAAC, HMRC.

one time sixteen feet atop its four-foot-tall granite base).<sup>80</sup> Save for the palm frond covering his midsection and sword against his legs, *Spirit* is completely nude. Lastly, a rectangular plaque, which now rests beside *Spirit* at the museum, detached from the original granite base, proclaims, “To all heroes of the South who fought for the principles of states [*sic*] rights.”

At first glance, *Spirit* strikes the viewer as biblical, ethereal, and mysterious. On the one hand, the palm branch covering its midsection evokes themes of “victory, triumph, peace, and eternal life,” as suggested by Christian writer Jim Robidoux. It was palm branches that Jerusalem’s inhabitants waved when Jesus Christ entered the city in the New Testament.<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, the curvature of the branch visually emphasizes the statue’s *contrapposto* posture: “an asymmetrical arrangement of the human figure in which the line of the arms and shoulders contrasts with, while balancing, those of the hips and legs.”<sup>82</sup> Stated another way, *contrapposto* refers to how *Spirit* leans on his back leg, shifting his hips backward as a result. As art historian Sarah Beetham points out, classical techniques link monuments like *Spirit* to Grecian, Roman, and Neoclassicist traditions rather than southern folk art, complicating the question of their southern “heritage.”<sup>83</sup> Much like how the rhetoric of white supremacists and replacement

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<sup>80</sup> “Texas Historical Commission, The State Agency for Historic Preservation | Information Specific to Monument #1,” n.d., Box 8, Folder 36, RG A 33, HMACC, HMRC, 1.

<sup>81</sup> Jim Robidoux, “Palm Sunday: Holy Week and the symbolism of the palm branch,” Ink Link, <https://manchesterinklink.com/palm-sunday-holy-week-symbolism-palm-branch/>.

<sup>82</sup> “Contrapposto,” Google, <https://www.google.com/search?q=contrapposto+definition&oq=contrapp&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j69i59j0i433i512j0i51213j0i10i512j0i51213.1769j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.

<sup>83</sup> Sarah Beetham, “Confederate Monuments: Southern Heritage or Southern Art?” *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2020).

theorists drew – and still draw – from fascism and especially Nazism, so too do the visual embodiments of those beliefs.

However, despite the monument’s intriguing symbolism, the museum provides no further contextual information about the commissioning organization or the artist. One of the museum’s few avenues for engagement, a webpage entitled “Conversations – History Ours and Yours,” contains videos spanning from the history of enslavement to recorded lectures and a section instructing white Americans on allyship and racial justice. To Guess, *Spirit* is “evidence,” preserved in a context intended to educate visitors about the legacy of slavery.<sup>84</sup> “Years from now,” a writer for HMAAC declared in a press release issued shortly after *Spirit*’s relocation, “[W]hen conspiracy mongers suggest that slavery was made up and that there were no white supremacists advocating for it, like the ones who claim there was no Holocaust, a museum in Houston, Texas will have the empirical evidence. When you find yourself at a crime scene, you don’t destroy the evidence. You preserve it for the prosecution.”<sup>85</sup> Yet, as this thesis explores in Chapter 4, the museum elected to focus on *Spirit*’s implications for local communities and antiracist activism rather than clarify its connections to the Confederacy, slavery, and white supremacy.

Regardless of these informational gaps, HMAAC’s adoption of a Confederate monument has garnered criticism and reflection from Black Houstonians. Immediately following *Spirit*’s relocation in June 2020, Dr. James Douglas, president of the Houston NAACP, issued a statement in opposition to the museum’s new acquisition. “This is a

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<sup>84</sup> John Guess, Jr., interview with Morgan Thomas, November 15, 2021, UH - Oral History.

<sup>85</sup> “HMAAC Receives Confederate Monument from the City of Houston.”

situation where we're honoring people who intended to destroy the nation and I don't think anyone can justify that," he stated. "You don't see any statues honoring any of the Nazi regimes in Germany[,] and you definitely wouldn't see statue[s] honoring Nazis who fought with Hitler in any Holocaust museums."<sup>86</sup> In contrast, in a recorded poem entitled "This Is What Hatred Looks Like," African American poet Willow Curry conveyed a sense of empowerment:

Generations of people have taken up your sword, and your flag, and your gun...And yet, despite your continued dominion, the foot that remains on our necks, times change. I see you're looking at Bert Long, Jr.'s field of eyes. Aren't they a marvel? All looking at you. No matter how infuriated it makes you...You're on our turf now.<sup>87</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although HMAAC recognizes that Black Americans have been victimized by slavery, Jim Crow, and police brutality, it focuses on how communities can use *Spirit of the Confederacy* as an impetus to reflect upon and take action against white supremacy. The next chapter examines how HMAAC has engaged with *Spirit* in its facility. It also sheds light on the role of public funding in elevating or discouraging

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<sup>86</sup> Syan Rhodes, "President of Houston NAACP condemns relocation of confederate statue to African-American museum," *Click2Houston*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.click2houston.com/news/local/2020/06/16/president-of-houston-naacp-condemns-relocation-of-confederate-statue-to-african-american-museum/>.

<sup>87</sup> Dominic Clay, "HMAAC's Fellow and Artist Resident | Willow Curry | addresses: The Spirit," YouTube, August 28, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5W8PX9DOJ0&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5W8PX9DOJ0&feature=emb_title).

African American and Confederate narratives, a challenge faced by many African American museums.



## CHAPTER 4 – “TELLING OUR OWN STORY”: HMAAC’S RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF SPIRIT OF THE CONFEDERACY

Today, the Houston Museum of African American Culture (HMAAC) still stands on the corners of Caroline and Wentworth Streets after a decade of operation. Nowadays, a newspaper box located near the doorway of the white building features, upon closer inspection, an article titled “REPARATIONS: Where Are Our 40 Acres And A Mule?” The box’s exterior, painted in a comic book style, illustrates the story of a Black superwoman bearing the letters “BW” on her chest. Inside the building, a panel of glass surrounding the desk attests to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on local businesses. Finally, although not available for public viewing, the *Spirit of the Confederacy* monument resides in HMAAC’s backyard, staring defiantly with crossed arms at Bert L. Long, Jr.’s equally vigilant *Field of Vision*.

HMAAC’s treatment of *Spirit of the Confederacy* deviates little from its commitment to uplifting local communities, facilitating multicultural conversations, and collecting, interpreting, and exhibiting African American material culture. Rather than allowing the monument to dominate its exhibitions, the museum uses its website, which includes community resources and examples of Black artistry, to recontextualize it and display it to the public. Programming unique to the monument suggests an effort to provide an avenue for healing from racial violence and to carve out a way for people of all racial backgrounds to learn more about and push back against racism.

In 2020, HMAAC negotiated with the Houston Endowment and the Office of the Mayor to relocate *Spirit of the Confederacy* to the museum. In a statement that shows no author but lists John Guess, Jr. as its media contact, the museum acknowledged the American public's unprecedented interest in "black realities" following Floyd's highly publicized murder. First, it observed that for some Americans previously "indifferent to" the historical and modern injustices facing Black Americans, "destroying symbols of the Confederacy [was] at the forefront of what many [felt] they [could] do" to denounce racism symbolically. Secondly, the statement reported more visitors than in the past acknowledging HMAAC's ten-year commitment to racial justice conversations.<sup>1</sup> Just as the museum hosted symposiums asking "Why Did 53% of White Women Vote for Donald Trump?" and "Did the Barack Obama Presidency Improve the Lives of African Americans?", the statement reiterated HMAAC's dedication to facilitating "multicultural conversation[s] on race geared towards a common future."<sup>2</sup> HMAAC's statement concluded, on a hopeful note, that such "truth-telling" would help the Black community heal locally and nationally.

## **REPRESENTATIONAL CRITIQUE**

On the surface, HMAAC's determination to teach the Black community's story of injustice and healing echoes the issue of minority representation underlying the Confederate monument debate, museum studies, and public history. In 1908, the Italian

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<sup>1</sup> "HMAAC Receives Confederate Monument from the City of Houston," HMAAC, <https://hmaac.org/hmaac-receivesconfederate-monument-from-the-city-of-houston>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

artist Louis Amateis intended for *Spirit* to narrowly embody a white, southern vision of the Civil War as he was commissioned to do. At the monument's unveiling, ceremony speakers equated the Confederacy's fight for states' rights with patriotism, referring to a reverence for the nation's federalist principles. By contrast, in a 2017 *New York Times* op-ed, historian Eric Foner questioned the belief that Confederate monuments represent "the history and culture of our great country," to quote a tweet by then President Donald Trump.<sup>3</sup> Foner argued that the chanting of "blood and soil" by Charlottesville's neo-Nazis echoed not only the Confederacy's denial of African Americans' humanity and citizenship under slavery but the more deep-seated assumption that America is, and should be, fundamentally white.<sup>4</sup> "This is the tradition that the Southern Confederacy embodied and sought to preserve and that Mr. Trump, inadvertently or not, identifies with by equating the Confederacy with 'our history and culture,'" Foner opined.<sup>5</sup> Thus, HMAAC's adoption of *Spirit* offers an alternative perspective to a traditionally exclusionary narrative. Rather than celebrating southern virtue, the monument now encourages viewers, whether in-person or virtually, to confront it as a symbol of hate that, by elevating Confederate heroism, overshadows the consequences of white supremacist ideals for Black citizens.

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Foner, "Opinion | Confederate Statues and 'Our' History," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/20/opinion/confederate-statues-american-history.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Infamous for its use by German nationalists under the Nazi regime, "blood and soil," a rallying cry for neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, refers to the belief that "ethnicity is based solely on blood descent and the territory one maintains" (Epstein). Furthermore, the term "blood" specifically refers "to the goal of a 'racially pure' Aryan people" (United States Holocaust Museum). For more information, see Adam Epstein, "'Blood and Soil': The Meaning of the Nazi Slogan Chanted by White Nationalists in Charlottesville," and "Origins of Neo-Nazi and White Supremacist Terms and Symbols" by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

<sup>5</sup> Foner, "Opinion | Confederate Statues and 'Our' History."

If expanding Black representation in the Civil War canon were HMAAC's sole motivation for adopting *Spirit*, it would be operating on the premise of what art historian Sharon Macdonald terms the *representational critique*. Museum studies and public history scholars have long confronted the question of representation, "[H]ow meanings come to be inscribed and by whom, and how some come to be regarded as 'right' or taken as given."<sup>6</sup> For example, during the 1960s, academic historians began inquiring into the neglected experiences of "ordinary people, workers, enslaved people, immigrants, families, and nonelite communities."<sup>7</sup> Likewise, around the 1980s, academic disciplines previously seen as "engaged in a value-free discovery of ever-better knowledge" introspected, asking, "What was researched, how and why, and, just as significantly, what was ignored or taken for granted and not questioned?"<sup>8</sup> The impact of this bottom-up approach on history and museum studies, historian Joan Scott observes, has been "an enlargement of the picture, a correction to oversights resulting from inaccurate or incomplete vision."<sup>9</sup>

More significantly, *Spirit's* relocation to HMAAC occurred as historians pondered the future of Confederate monuments remaining in public spaces. One such historian of architectural history at the University of Virginia, Louis Nelson, argues not

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<sup>6</sup> Sharon Macdonald, *A Companion to Museum Studies*, (Chicester: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 48.

<sup>7</sup> Larry Cebula, David Kyvig, and Myron Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London, United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Sharon Macdonald, *A Companion to Museum Studies*, (Chicester: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 48.

<sup>9</sup> Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–797, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343743>. Scott herself notes that treating a subject's "experience" as authoritative when studying marginalized perspectives is not uncomplicated. For more, reference Scott.

for removing monuments from public view, but for recontextualizing them. Nelson defines recontextualization as transforming monument squares into “open-air” spaces appropriate for learning about the “simultaneous histories of lynching, Confederate monuments, and Jim Crow policies.”<sup>10</sup> Stated another way, proponents of recontextualization advocate for preserving Confederate monuments to transform them and their surrounding environments into lessons on white supremacy and racial violence. In 2017, the University of Texas at Austin practiced recontextualization by relocating a monument of Jefferson Davis to the Briscoe Center for American History. The monument joined an exhibit called “From Commemoration to Education: Pompeo Coppini’s [the artist] Statue of Jefferson Davis” as its centerpiece. “Leaving Confederate monuments in place is a silent endorsement of this skewed view of history [the Lost Cause],” Don Carleton, the founding director of the Briscoe Center, wrote that year. “Moving them to educational spaces enables them to be appropriately contextualized as historical objects.”<sup>11</sup>

However, in a 2021 video-recorded oral history, Guess clarified that HMAAC’s mission does not lie with countering *Spirit’s* original narrative with stories of slavery, racism, and victimization. Instead, Guess displayed a greater interest in authoring a new, empowering, inclusive community history. “We don’t want our story to just be that ‘We were victims.’ I’m very clear about that,” he stated, emphasizing his point with an

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<sup>10</sup> “The End of an Era: On History, Context, and Confederate Monuments,” International Coalition of Sites on Conscience, <https://www.sitesofconscience.org/en/2017/05/the-end-of-an-era-on-history-context-and-confederate-monuments/>.

<sup>11</sup> Don Carleton, “UT removed Confederate statues from campus, not the classroom,” *The Hill*, August 23, 2017, <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/education/347704-ut-is-removing-confederate-statues-from-display-but-not-from-the?rl=1>.

emphatic shake of his head. “I have issues at times with people who want to talk about representation: how we’re represented in a white world, and not our condition outside of that... We’re not trying to be part of a white story. We’re trying to be part of *our* story that includes people of every color.”<sup>12</sup>

Guess’s vision for *Spirit* extends the traditional educational intent behind recontextualization, which is to remind onlookers that white supremacy has historically enabled violence against Black Americans and continues to do so. Instead, HMAAC’s treatment of *Spirit*, which I analyze in the following sections, intersects with its broader goal of acknowledging and expanding the African American experience through multicultural conversations. If anything, Guess’s stress on the determiner “our” in the quote above more closely reflects the concept of *initiative* explained by Black studies scholar Maulana Karenga:

...[T]he important issue here, as Black studies stresses, is to offer a dynamic portrait of African life in which Africans are not simply people swept up in the experience of victimization or passive encounter in the world, but rather are active agents of their own life, engaging their environment, each other and other people in unique, meaningful, and valuable ways.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> John Guess, Jr., interview with Morgan Thomas, November 15, 2021, UH – Oral History.

<sup>13</sup> Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 2010), 5.

## ***SPIRIT OF THE CONFEDERACY* RECONTEXTUALIZED IN A DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT**

As described in Chapter 3, *Spirit of the Confederacy* resides in HMAAC's backyard, guarded by a tall wooden fence. According to Guess, security concerns influenced the museum's decision to hide the monument from public view. "When I say that we took these steps, it isn't because John Guess or our board had a 'feeling' about it," Guess clarified. "It's because police were telling us we needed to be careful...Those [precautions] determined for us how we would let the public interact with [the monument]. We wanted to have a lesson, but we didn't want to incite people."<sup>14</sup>

To compensate for the limited in-person opportunities to engage with the monument, HMAAC designed a virtual alternative, a webpage entitled "Conversations – History Ours and Yours." Subdivided into categories such as "The Spirit of the Confederacy: Discussing the Concept of White Supremacy," this online page contains lectures, explanatory videos, and recorded events that attempt to contextualize contemporary African American experiences. Possibly influenced by the immediacy of Floyd's murder, it also invites viewers from all racial backgrounds to partake in antiracism conversations.

In keeping with Nelson's concept of recontextualizing Confederate monuments, I analyzed the total digital environment in which HMAAC displays *Spirit* virtually.<sup>15</sup> "Conversations" joins and extends pre-existing pages that offer community resources,

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<sup>14</sup> John Guess, Jr., interview with Morgan Thomas, November 15, 2021, UH – Oral History.

<sup>15</sup> Here, I borrow Merriam-Webster's definition of "environment": "the circumstances, objects, or conditions by which one is surrounded." "Environment," Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environment>.

work created by Black artists, previous exhibitions, and information about the museum for potential visitors. From this macro-level perspective of *Spirit's* surrounding digital environment, "Conversations – History Ours and Yours" exists in relation to resources organized to (1) equip citizens to improve themselves and their community, and (2) demonstrate the diversity of art from Houston, the southwest, and the African diaspora at large.<sup>16</sup> In some ways, the website itself functions as a rebuttal against the Confederacy. *Spirit's* surrounding digital environment disproves myths tied to the Confederacy's defense of Black inferiority, such as the belief that African Americans were incapable of contributing culturally to American society and, as "childlike" beings, relied slavishly on their white counterparts in the Old South.<sup>17</sup> The following page descriptions indicate the ways in which this rebuttal occurs.

### **"The Word...Just for You"**

"The Word...Just for You," yet another page available on HMAAC's website, spotlights African American leaders who articulate the importance of self-reliance and taking advantage of community resources. The page manifests HMAAC's mission statement, which "seeks to provide access to resources where they have been scarce and thereby elevate and transform our [visitors' lives], empowering them to change our

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<sup>16</sup> "Our Mission," HMAAC, <https://hmaac.org/>.

<sup>17</sup> Fath Davis Ruffins, "Building Homes for Black History: Museum Founders, Founding Directors, and Pioneers, 1915-95," *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (August 2018): 13-43; Bruce A. Glasrud, "Child or Beast?: White Texas' View of Blacks, 1900-1910," *East Texas Historical Journal* 15, no. 2 (1977): 38.



communities.”<sup>18</sup> For example, in a 2009 video, Michael Steele, the first African American to serve as chairman of the Republican National Committee, speaks to Woodson Senior High School students in Washington D.C. as part of C-SPAN’s Students and Leaders series.<sup>19</sup> During this two-minute clip, Steele recalls growing up in a “still segregated” Washington D.C. in the 1960s. As the son of a single mother widowed after his father died of cirrhosis of the liver caused by alcoholism, Steele’s future looked bleak.

“What did the statistics say?” he asks the students. They pitch in. “You won’t be able to survive; you’re not going to make it; ‘nothing going on for that family; go to jail or die.”

Steele nods, repeating each response in affirmation. “So, what happened? What was the difference?” he continued. “Despite the odds, despite what people say, despite the limitations that are put on you, you’re ultimately the one to make the decision. You’re ultimately the one who gets to decide whether you succeed or fail.”<sup>20</sup> Echoing Maulana Karenga’s concept of *initiative* discussed above, Steele communicates the importance of self-determination for improving their own lives to his young audience and, indirectly, to HMAAC’s viewers.

The same webpage also provides resources for combatting obstacles caused by the coronavirus pandemic. For instance, in 2020, the museum hosted a fifty-five-minute

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<sup>18</sup> “HMAAC White Paper Addendum Today and Future,” 4 (Provided by courtesy of John Guess, Jr.).

<sup>19</sup> C-SPAN, “C-SPAN’s Students & Leaders: RNC Chair Steele, Clip 2,” YouTube, May 22, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjMEnI6zLSM>; “Michael Steele | Biography & Facts | Britannica,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Michael-Steele>.

<sup>20</sup> C-SPAN, “C-SPAN’s Students & Leaders: RNC Chair Steele, Clip 2.”

webinar titled “The ABCs of Virtual Learning.” Roni Burren, a University of Houston curriculum and instruction doctoral recipient, and K-12 educator Raven Thomas moderated the event. Whereas Burren offered ways to meet the literacy needs of students at home, Thomas advised parents to prepare for virtual learning by researching district expectations, attending school-wide events (e.g., Meet the Teacher nights, technology deployment days), networking with fellow parents, and involving children in planning.<sup>21</sup> Another video – “When the Museum is Closed | Camp Logan” – encourages viewers to seek learning opportunities in their communities amid pandemic shutdowns. In this two-minute clip, Sam Smoots, HMAAC’s civic engagement and investment manager since 2012, summarizes the history of the 1917 Camp Logan “race riot” at what is now Memorial Park. “There are so many things to see and do to learn about African American history and culture while a museum is closed,” Smoot tells viewers.<sup>22</sup> At home and within their community, viewers are empowered to self-educate despite any challenges they encounter.

### **“From the Web – Our Picks”**

Under “From the Web – Our Picks,” the museum has curated several online performances, music videos, poetry readings, and even age-appropriate resources for young people. From *Don Quixote*, a ballet performed by African American dancer Lauren Anderson and her Cuban stage partner, Carlos Acosta, to “#BlackExcellence,”

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<sup>21</sup> Davinia Reed, “ABCs of Virtual Learning,” YouTube, August 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cb7MoGvWmTY>.

<sup>22</sup> Dominic Clay, “HMAAC | When the Museum Is Closed | Camp Logan,” YouTube, August 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQVdKJMuyVk>.

a reinterpretation of the American rapper A\$AP Ferg’s “Black,” the webpage showcases several cultural contributions by artists of color.<sup>23</sup> In this way, “From the Web – Our Picks” mimics HMAAC’s in-person galleries in diversity and media type, as discussed in Chapter 3. It archives examples of African American artistry that affirm Black visitors’ connection to a rich cultural heritage, opposing myths about Black inferiority endorsed by the Confederacy and white supremacists.

As American art historian Erin Thompson correctly points out in her 2022 book *Smashing Statues*, the museum’s acquisition symbolizes its “power over something that once symbolized [Black Americans’] powerlessness.”<sup>24</sup> That power has been achieved by immersing *Spirit* in a narrative that insists on Black Americans’ autonomy and cultural value, which HMAAC’s website demonstrates.

### **“Conversations – History Ours and Yours”**

“Conversations – History Ours and Yours” merges HMAAC’s community and artistic initiatives with “Lest We Forget,” a theme that grew from the museum’s handling of the monument. “Lest We Forget” refers to HMAAC’s initial “National Conversation with the Confederacy,” which occurred on October 26, 2019. Moderated by American art curator Lowery Sims, Bernard Kinsey, and other thought leaders from around the country, this day-long event featured three panels titled “The Endless Civil War,” “Telling Stories in Black as Well as White,” and “On Confederate Monuments

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<sup>23</sup> “Poetry,” HMAAC, <https://hmaac.org/poetry>; “Performance,” HMAAC, <https://hmaac.org/dance-performance>.

<sup>24</sup> “Excerpt from Erin Thompson’s *Smashing Statues* Chapter 6, *Too Damn Beautiful*,” Provided courtesy of John Guess, Jr., 3.

and Other Things.”<sup>25</sup> Guess reported that HMAAC recorded this private event in a forty-page document, which is not yet publicly available.<sup>26</sup> Despite limited public access to the program, the museum continued its “Lest We Forget” programming with support from the Houston Endowment in 2020.<sup>27</sup>

Just as HMAAC reiterated its dedication to facilitating multicultural conversations on race, “Conversations – History Ours and Yours” roots *Spirit of the Confederacy*’s online programming in a legacy of dialogue among scholars and community members. In one lecture on August 18, 2020, Mary Elliot, a curator of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), presented her research on the methods Black communities used to secure the right to vote during Reconstruction. For example, she described how the Black citizens of Oktibbeha County, Mississippi confronted whites on muleback, wielding swords to enforce their right to vote. As the curator of NMAAHC’s Slavery and Freedom exhibition, Elliot recognized the power of historical artifacts to spark conversations about similar stories among those interested in Black history, regardless of race or ethnicity. Accordingly, Elliot used Freedmen’s Town, the lecture location, to relate NMAAHC’s acquisition of a slave cabin from Edisto Island, South Carolina to Houston’s historical preservation efforts, as seen with the Gregory School, which is discussed in Chapter 3. Her tale of Black Americans enforcing their right to vote thus

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<sup>25</sup> HMAAC Instagram, “Lest We Forget: A National Conversation with the Confederacy at HMAAC,” October 25, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B4DH8idA6bP/>.

<sup>26</sup> John Guess, Jr., interview with Morgan Thomas, November 15, 2021, UH – Oral History.

<sup>27</sup> “HMAAC Receives Confederate Monument from the City of Houston.”

entwined with her stress on the importance of restoring, knowing, and owning a community's history.

Under "The Spirit of the Confederacy: Discussing the Concept of White Supremacy," HMAAC examines *Spirit of the Confederacy* artistically and intellectually. The subsection opens with HMAAC artist in residence Willow Curry speaking to *Spirit* through the poem "This Is What Hatred Looks Like." Exuding the same "we-will-overcome" attitude Elliot used to portray Black Americans during Reconstruction, Curry assures *Spirit* that "We [us captured Africans; us persecuted colored folk; us proud, resilient Blacks] will never let you out of our sight." Despite the continuation of racism and the Lost Cause myth – evidence of *Spirit's* "success" – Curry relates the eye sculptures in Long's *Field of Vision*, which stare at *Spirit*, to a turning point, a watchful public forever confronting a violent philosophy.<sup>28</sup> Long, now deceased, left behind a biographical narrative that nuances Curry's interpretation:

As artists, we have the obligation to provide the world with work that communicates truth. I believe that art has the power to heal our souls of some affliction. I try to create art that diagnoses the prevalent misconditions [*sic*] within our society and extends some insight into how we can help become more united in brotherhood and compassion.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Dominic Clay, "HMAAC's Fellow and Artist Resident | Willow Curry | addresses: The Spirit," YouTube, August 28, 2020,

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5W8PX9DOJ0&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5W8PX9DOJ0&feature=emb_title).

<sup>29</sup> "BERT L. LONG JR. BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE," n.d., Box 1, Folder 18, Bert L. Long, Jr. Papers, Special Collections, M.D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries, Houston, TX.

The other videos reflect Curry's transition from a personal denouncement of white supremacy to realizing one's power to oppose it. For example, "Why Did Europeans Enslave Africans?" explains European colonists' economic motivations for enslaving West Africans from the 16th century onward. Then, "Ex Slaves Talk About Slavery In The USA" plays the recorded testimonies of former slaves collected in the 1930s and 1940s, many of whom described memories of abuse, their reduction to property, and inadequate living conditions.<sup>30</sup> However, in the subsection's end, HMAAC concludes on a hopeful note with an interview of J. Samuel Williams, a Black minister from Farmville, Virginia. The museum labeled the video "The 1<sup>st</sup> Time A Black Man Talked Back." Williams recalls how, in the fourth grade, his Black teacher defied the white superintendent's demand to keep the school auditorium doors closed. He remembers "a prism of light [breaking] into [his] soul":

Mr. McElwain was Mr. McElwain, white superintendent of schools, of both counties. And he was Mr. McElwain: next to Jesus. When he came, and the other whites came to Robert Russa Moton Elementary School, oh, how we used to have to sing our hearts out: "God bless America," "My Country, 'Tis of Thee." We really went to work on that for them...This Black teacher [who defied the superintendent] told me the system can be opposed. It can be protested. Because I didn't know anybody could talk against a white person like that. I thought his rule was *the* rule...[The teacher] wanted the doors [to the auditorium] open

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<sup>30</sup> "The Spirit of the Confederacy: Discussing the Concept of White Supremacy," HMAAC, accessed, <https://hmaac.org/new-page-75>.

at *all* times, and they were open at all times after he [the Black teacher] said that.<sup>31</sup>

In essence, HMAAC extends an invitation to oppose the system Williams described in its final subsection, “What White People Can Do.” Three videos – “What If White People Led The Charge To End Racism?,” “Sean Fitzpatrick: What White People Can Do,” and “How Dave Chappelle Educated A White Women on BLM” – speak to the importance of allyship, working through the emotional unease of being a witness to racial violence, and educating oneself to become part of the solution. “What White People Can Do” emerged on May 30, 2020, five days after the death of George Floyd. In it, Sean Fitzpatrick, director of the Jung Center of Houston, felt fear, uncertainty, and shame as a white man himself. Nevertheless, “We need to use our power to change this senseless horror,” Fitzpatrick urges. “To do that, we need to allow ourselves to feel what we’re feeling.” Rather than shaming viewers into action, Fitzpatrick extends empathy, recommends educational books, listens to those affected by violence, speaks up against misinformation, and accepts inevitable mistakes. Believing that no shame can compare to nonwhite Americans’ painful experiences, Fitzpatrick concludes, “We [white people] need to use our power...Things won’t change until we do.”<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps nothing epitomizes the museum’s denouncement of the Lost Cause narrative more than the Black artist John Sims’ *Sixth Burn and Bury*, which took place

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<sup>31</sup> David Hoffman, “1950s - He Remembers The 1st Time A Black Man Talked Back,” YouTube, February 4, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFTEuQUUDs0>.

<sup>32</sup> The Jung Center of Houston, “What White People Can Do,” YouTube, May 30, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVxYvHxsJzs>.

on May 31, 2020. The event continued Sims' Recoloration Proclamation project, "a twenty-year multi-media project [that] explores the complexity of identity, cultural appropriation and visual terrorism in the context of Confederate iconography and African American culture."<sup>33</sup> In an interesting contrast to *Spirit's* 1908 dedication ceremony, an audience led by Reverend Dr. Freddy Haynes, gospel singer Denise Fowler, Houston poet laureate Dr. Jordan Simpson, John Sims, and other Black leaders held a eulogy at the statue's feet in HMAAC's backyard. A fire pit burned in the space before *Spirit*, with a podium for the speakers standing to its left. Each presenter expressed their feelings. Reverend Dr. Haynes described the *Spirit of the Confederacy* as an attitude entrenched in American soil; Dr. Simpson performed a poem expressing his lived experiences with racism; and Fowler sang "Amazing Grace" over the crackling fire, backed by no music. Finally, Sims facilitated the burning of the Confederate flag. One by one, audience members threw printed copies of the Confederate flag into the burning orange flames.<sup>34</sup> Although the "spirit of the Confederacy" as an attitude that embraces Lost Cause mythology may continue, its symbols are "not determinative" anymore, Guess said in his interview. They no longer have power.

Gina Carroll, HMAAC board president when the transfer of the monument was negotiated, said, "We are an institution pushing for change, but we also must be a place

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<sup>33</sup> "John Sims Sixth Annual Burn and Bury," HMAAC, <https://hmaac.org/john-sims-sixth-annual-burn-and-bury>.

<sup>34</sup> Houston Museum of African American Culture, "Burn and Bury 2021: A John Sims Project," YouTube, May 31, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txscUVv8Alo>.



where our community can come [to] heal. I think our supporters respect our receiving the statue and the programming that has preceded it and that will come.”<sup>35</sup>

## **PUBLIC FUNDING DISPARITIES BETWEEN HMAAC AND CONFEDERATE HISTORICAL SITES**

Despite the breadth of artistic and educational resources HMAAC’s website provides, none address *Spirit’s* conception, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, or the Confederacy’s explicit support of African enslavement. In his 2021 interview, Guess admitted that the lack of context may inhibit guests from fully appreciating HMAAC’s acquisition. “There are times when we’re held accountable for not doing things just because we don’t have the funds,” he said. Guess explained that the museum has plans to expand its monument programming, but they are contingent on funding. For instance, HMAAC has explored developing curricula with Prairie View A&M and Johns Hopkins Universities; Guess also hopes to launch an interactive online portal that uses AI technology to revolutionize visitor engagement with *Spirit*. But with its current spending power and African American focus, HMAAC chose not to dwell on “that travesty that happened [slavery]”:

We can’t change that part, but we can change where we’re going...The majority of our audience [is not elite]. They’re people that have to feel that their lives are represented...So, we chose to focus on what we can

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<sup>35</sup> “HMAAC Receives Confederate Monument from the City of Houston.”

do together, and not on the time when we were apart from each other and at odds.<sup>36</sup>

Guess's financial concerns typify African American museums' historic struggle to attract funding. They also stand in stark contrast to the willingness of some state governments to finance Confederate Civil War sites through budgeting and public tax dollars. Although funding limitations influenced HMAAC's decisions about how to best contextualize *Spirit of the Confederacy* historically, promoting collective action against racism ultimately took precedence over reminding visitors of the nation's divided past. Committed to empowering local communities, the museum uses *Spirit* in the service of its overarching mission.

It is important to note that finances and community-based initiatives go hand in hand for the museum. HMAAC allows guests to peruse its virtual and in-person exhibits free of charge, a luxury that extends beyond cultivating a positive visitor experience. By dismantling the financial barrier to visit the museum, HMAAC hopes to give low-income citizens the same opportunities that wealthier people have to feel culturally empowered.<sup>37</sup> The museum's goals are responsive to the needs of local residents, as seen in a 2021 survey by the Kinder Institute for Urban Research that found that 31 percent of Black Harris County residents earned a household income under \$37,500 in 2020.

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<sup>36</sup> John Guess, Jr., interview with Morgan Thomas, November 15, 2021, UH – Oral History.

<sup>37</sup> “HMAAC White Paper Addendum Today and Future,” 4 (Provided by courtesy of John Guess, Jr.).

The Institute considers those who identify with this demographic vulnerable to educational inequalities in today's knowledge-based economy.<sup>38</sup>

In 2012, the year that it opened, HMAAC expressed its financial concerns, which impacted its programming capabilities, through a work of art. *Fort HMAAC* by Otabenga Jones and Associates, a Houston-based educational art organization, featured tan sandbags flanking the museum entrance. *Houston Chronicle* writer Molly Glentzer first thought HMAAC appeared to be anticipating one of the city's infamous floods. On the contrary, she wrote, "Guess wanted the installation to express his sense that HMAAC [was] under siege and [needed] protection."<sup>39</sup> Recognizing HMAAC's vulnerability as a fledgling African American institution, Guess referred to its insufficient support from public donors and the need to protect HMAAC "against the exclusion of Black history."<sup>40</sup> In reference to the Center for Houston's Future (CHF) 2014 Arts and Cultural Heritage study, Guess wrote in 2016, "While the Houston region benefits from an exceptionally generous body of philanthropists, less than 2% of Houston's philanthropic dollars go to cultural institutions of color."<sup>41</sup> With \$4-5 million needed for renovations, the lack of support forced Guess and HMAAC's board to organize exhibits on a "shoestring budget" in its early days.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Bozick, Stephen Klineberg, and the Kinder Institute for Urban Research, *The Fortieth Year of the Kinder Houston Area Survey: Into the Post-Pandemic Future* (Rice University Kinder Institute for Urban Research, 2021), 2, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Molly Glentzer, "A museum forges ahead, ideas ablaze," *Houston Chronicle*, March 25, 2012, 8.

<sup>40</sup> "Fort HMAAC | Otabenga Jones and Associates," 2012, Box 9, Folder 17, Bert L. Long, Jr. Papers, Special Collections, M.D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries, Houston, TX, 2.

<sup>41</sup> John Guess, "A Call for Equity in Houston Cultural Funding," HMAAC, <https://hmaac.org/white-paper>.

<sup>42</sup> Glentzer, "A museum forges ahead, ideas ablaze," 8.

Guess began writing on this topic in his *White Papers* series, published on HMAAC's website. Categorizing HMAAC as a cultural asset – characterized as any entity that enhances the “culture, meaning, and vitality” of a community – Guess highlighted how being disproportionately underfunded hindered the museum from serving predominantly Black neighborhoods. (In HMAAC's most recently publicized tax form, the museum earned \$736,748 in revenue in 2019, \$683,621 from contributions and grants.<sup>43</sup> Guess clarified in an email exchange that HMAAC is the only African American museum “in the country without dedicated public funding as a public good.”)<sup>44</sup> Citing a study by New York University professor Patrick Starkey, Guess reported that “70 percent of African American children raised in the poorest and most segregated neighborhoods a generation ago now [raise] their children in similar circumstances...Consider Houston's Sunnyside neighborhood, historically segregated with little political clout and neglected public services, as a contemporary example of a ‘stuck in place or decline’ neighborhood.”<sup>45</sup> Further, he argued that the closure of schools, post offices, and smaller African American art galleries – the cultural and educational backbones of Black communities – meant that cultural assets necessitate funding throughout their lifespan, not just their advocates' outrage when they cease to exist.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “Houston Museum of African American Culture | 2019 Form 990,” GuideStar, [https://pdf.guidestar.org/PDF\\_Images/2019/311/749/2019-311749060-202023329349300102-9.pdf?\\_gl=1\\*kv8uxl\\*\\_ga\\*OTg3NDA2OTA5LjE2NTAyMjAyOTA.\\*\\_ga\\_5W8PXYYGBX\\*MTY1MDIyMDI5MC4xLjEuMTY1MDIyMDUxMS40&\\_ga=2.83113503.827517157.1650220292-987406909.1650220290](https://pdf.guidestar.org/PDF_Images/2019/311/749/2019-311749060-202023329349300102-9.pdf?_gl=1*kv8uxl*_ga*OTg3NDA2OTA5LjE2NTAyMjAyOTA.*_ga_5W8PXYYGBX*MTY1MDIyMDI5MC4xLjEuMTY1MDIyMDUxMS40&_ga=2.83113503.827517157.1650220292-987406909.1650220290).

<sup>44</sup> Morgan Thomas, Email to John Guess, Jr., March 9, 2022.

<sup>45</sup> John Guess, “A Cultural Plan for Houston's African American Communities,” HMAAC, <https://hmaac.org/white-papers>.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Unfortunately, HMAAC is not alone in its financial concerns. In a 2018 article in *The Public Historian*, authors Jeff Hayward and Christine Larouche interpreted two reports commissioned by the Association of African American Museums (AAAM). Together, the 2008 “National Survey” and 2017 “AAAM Needs Assessment” attempted to identify, characterize, and “understand the needs of museum organizations with an explicit focus on African American themes.”<sup>47</sup> Of the respondents’ most pertinent needs, funding and advice about fundraising and grant writing were desperately needed.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, Hayward and Larouche graphed the annual operating budgets for African American museums between 2008 and 2016. Although about 27 percent of museums ran on at least \$1 million each year, about 47 percent of museums had \$100,000 or less. “The non-responding museums (which tend to be the very smallest institutions) would skew this distribution even more toward the low end,” the authors speculated.<sup>49</sup> Whether or not HMAAC participated in these surveys, its commentary on money joins documented concerns among African American museums nationwide.

In contrast, many Confederate historical sites across the United States receive financial support from government funds and public tax dollars. According to the *Smithsonian Magazine*, “[T]axpayers have directed at least \$40 million to Confederate monuments—statues, homes, parks, museums, libraries and cemeteries—and to Confederate heritage organizations” over the past decade. This statistic emerged from an investigative report published by Brian Palmer and Seth Freed Wessler of the

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<sup>47</sup> Hayward and Larouche, “The Emergence of the Field of African American Museums,” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 3 (August 2018): 163.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 171.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 168.

*Smithsonian Magazine* and the Investigative Fund at the Nation Institute in 2018. As Palmer and Wessler discovered, the Beauvoir Estate in Mississippi – the former home of Jefferson Davis – receives \$100,000 annually from the Mississippi State Legislature.<sup>50</sup> Emmanuel Felton of *The Washington Post* discovered similar circumstances in Alabama, whose Confederate Memorial Park received \$670,000 in taxpayer dollars in 2020.<sup>51</sup> Some confederate monuments also receive government protection. Take Stone Mountain State Park in Georgia, the site of the ninety-foot-tall carving of Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and “Stonewall” Jackson on the mountain’s face, where a 2001 state law declared that the memorial “shall never be altered, removed, concealed, or obscured in any fashion.”<sup>52</sup>

The problem, Palmer and Wessler explain, lies in the mythology that these Confederate historical sites perpetuate. Just as *Spirit of the Confederacy* hails the heroism of Confederate soldiers, neglecting the centrality of slavery to the Civil War, representatives of sites like the Beauvoir Estate often argue that owners treated enslaved people “like family,” obscuring the past and continued realities of racism.<sup>53</sup> One nighttime light show at Stone Mountain even animates the figures of Lee, Davis, and

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<sup>50</sup> “Monumental Lies,” Reveal, accessed March 7, 2022, <http://revealnews.org/podcast/monumental-lies/>.

<sup>51</sup> Emmanuel Felton, “Alabama Spends More than a Half-Million Dollars a Year on a Confederate Memorial. Black Historical Sites Struggle to Keep Their Doors Open.,” *The Washington Post*, October 4, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/alabama-spends-more-than-a-half-million-dollars-a-year-on-a-confederate-memorial-black-historical-sites-struggle-to-keep-their-doors-open/2021/10/03/77953f7e-222a-11ec-8fd4-57a5d9bf4b47\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/alabama-spends-more-than-a-half-million-dollars-a-year-on-a-confederate-memorial-black-historical-sites-struggle-to-keep-their-doors-open/2021/10/03/77953f7e-222a-11ec-8fd4-57a5d9bf4b47_story.html).

<sup>52</sup> Field of Vision, “The Painful History of a Confederate Monument Tells Itself,” *The Atlantic*, December 1, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/547253/confederate-monuments-graven-image/>.

<sup>53</sup> “Monumental lies.”

Jackson, projecting images of the men charging forward on horseback with swords victoriously raised.<sup>54</sup>

Of course, not all local governments endorse Confederate monuments. In addition to Houston's treatment of *Spirit*, Gainesville, a small Texas town, recently removed a Confederate statue erected by Chapter No. 366 of the Daughters of the Confederacy in the same year as *Spirit's* transferal.<sup>55</sup> Regardless of these examples of removing statues from public view, funding enables Confederate historical sites to achieve the purpose J. C. Hutcheson ascribed to monuments during *Spirit's* dedication ceremony, "to perpetuate unto other days and times the memory of those whose services have lent the largest measure of glory to the land of their birth."<sup>56</sup>

At the same time that HMAAC solicits permanent and grant funding, it has taken measures to become more financially independent. Expanding store and retail sales, conducting feasibility studies for "on the ground assets," and foraging into NFTs (non-fungible tokens), the museum, Guess reports, is open to entrepreneurial risk.<sup>57</sup> Although

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<sup>54</sup> Field of Vision, "The Painful History of a Confederate Monument Tells Itself."

<sup>55</sup> Megan Gray-Hatfield, "Coming down: More than 100-Year-Old Confederate Statue Removed from Leonard Park," *Gainesville Daily Register*, June 17, 2021, [https://www.gainesvilleregister.com/news/coming-down-more-than-100-year-old-confederate-statue-removed-from-leonard-park/article\\_4e013050-cff0-11eb-99a3-5b283e5baf7.html](https://www.gainesvilleregister.com/news/coming-down-more-than-100-year-old-confederate-statue-removed-from-leonard-park/article_4e013050-cff0-11eb-99a3-5b283e5baf7.html).

<sup>56</sup> "Women of South – Monument Unveiled by Daughters of the Confederacy of Houston | To Heroes of South | Tributes by President of United Daughters of Confederacy and Others | Capt. Hutcheson the Orator | Spirit of the Confederacy Beautifully Typified in Granite and Bronze," n.d., Box 8, Folder 40, RG A 33 Houston Municipal Art Commission Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, TX.

<sup>57</sup> Morgan Thomas, Email to John Guess, Jr., March 9, 2022. According to *Forbes Advisor*, a non-fungible token "is a digital asset that represents real-world objects like art, music, in game items and videos. They are bought and sold online, frequently with cryptocurrency, and they are generally encoded with the same underlying software as many cryptos." For more, see Robyn Conti and John Schmidt, "What Is An NFT? Non-Fungible Tokens Explained," *Forbes Advisor*, Last updated April 8, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/investing/cryptocurrency/nft-non-fungible-token/>.

not supported as consistently as Confederate Civil War sites, HMAAC utilizes its funds to display African American material culture, promote collective action, and uplift disadvantaged communities at risk of feeling undervalued.

## CONCLUSION

As this chapter has attempted to illustrate, *Spirit* has not dominated HMAAC's digital and physical exhibitions but rather joined and reinforced them. Removed from its original location in Sam Houston Park, *Spirit of the Confederacy* now stands in HMAAC's backyard, available for viewing online amid several digital examples of artistic, musical, and other creations by artists of color. Furthermore, HMAAC's determination to include white people in antiracism conversations surrounding *Spirit* aligns with its commitment to facilitate multicultural conversations on race "geared towards a common future."

Admittedly, the museum could have provided more contextual material or programming that clearly explains the history of the Lost Cause myth to which *Spirit* is tied. Nevertheless, *Spirit of the Confederacy* augments the museum's ongoing mission. It exemplifies Guess's interest in authoring a new, empowering community history – one that recognizes "not all white people are bad," to quote him – rather than focusing exclusively on Black Americans' victimization in the past and the present. To him, segregation is powerful: "You only see yourself, and that's not the true picture...it's why we want to bring people together" and use the monument to open a conversation



about what can be accomplished collectively. The results, he hopes, will satisfy white and Black participants' desire for practical and lasting change.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> John Guess, Jr., interview with Morgan Thomas, November 15, 2021, UH – Oral History.

## CONCLUSION

The Houston Museum of African American Culture (HMAAC) embodies the historic commitment of African American museums to their communities and racial empowerment. With an eye on economically disadvantaged visitors, the museum has curated several examples of African American material culture, underscoring Black citizens' connection to a rich cultural heritage to counteract longstanding notions of Black inferiority. At the same time, HMAAC has adapted to its diverse urban environment and the 21st century by facilitating multicultural conversations on race, offering digital content through its website, and venturing into modern revenue-generating activities like non-fungible tokens (NFTs).

HMAAC's acquisition of *Spirit of the Confederacy*, an artifact Guess believes is "evidence" of slavery, exemplifies and extends the museum's simultaneous commitment to the African American museum tradition and present-day demands.<sup>1</sup> Operating at the intersection of the past and the present, HMAAC responds to the legacy of white supremacy encapsulated in *Spirit* by debunking beliefs in Black Americans' artistic, intellectual, and racial inferiority – views espoused by the pro-slavery Confederacy – and commenting on ongoing injustices. Such a response has been publicized primarily through HMAAC's website, a digital manifestation of its in-house materials.

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<sup>1</sup> "HMAAC Receives Confederate Monument from the City of Houston," HMAAC, <https://hmaac.org/hmaac-receives-confederate-monument-from-the-city-of-houston>.

One hundred and fourteen years ago, in 1908, the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) celebrated the installation of *Spirit of the Confederacy* in Sam Houston Park. Now, rather than fueling the monument's original intent to commemorate the chivalry of the Confederacy's defenders, which ignored the centrality of slavery to the Civil War, HMAAC chooses to reinterpret *Spirit* to inspire unity and collective action against white supremacy. Even if the UDC members genuinely wanted to memorialize their Confederate ancestors, the beliefs that motivated the Confederacy's secession as articulated by Texas's *Declaration of the Causes which Impel the State of Texas to Secede from the Federal Union* have inspired and continue to inspire racial hatred and violence against Black Americans. The museum's acquisition expands the history behind the creation of *Spirit* and Houston's Robert E. Lee Chapter by transforming an object that was designed to perpetuate a skewed narrative about the Civil War into one that sparks viewers' anticipation of a more just future.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

This project captures and acknowledges the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the UDC and HMAAC's differing interpretations of *Spirit of the Confederacy*. However, notable limitations and recommendations worth pointing out remain. First, John Guess, Jr., the current CEO of HMAAC, served as the primary representative for the museum throughout my research. Though I had the pleasure of meeting the museum's staff informally during my visits, Guess responded to my requests for interviews and documents explaining HMAAC's internal operations. On the one hand, it seems fitting

that the person who founded Houston's first African American cultural museum should serve as its spokesperson. On the other hand, Guess commented that one board member proposed laying *Spirit* on its face rather than allowing it to stand, suggesting that some of the members may have held different visions for the monument than Guess did.<sup>2</sup>

Second, this project focused on HMAAC's acquisition and treatment of *Spirit of the Confederacy*, but the extent to which the museum has succeeded in impacting its local and national audiences has yet to be studied. Such an analysis, informed by interviews with visitors, could benefit other African American museums pondering the best course of action for exhibiting Confederate artifacts in the future.

### **Relevance to the Field**

The question of how to handle Confederate statues transcends academic conversations. As cities across the nation reacted to the 2015 Emmanuel A.M.E. church massacre, the 2017 Unite the Right Rally, and 2020 protests against racial injustice, Houston responded in kind, organizing a task force to determine the fate of four local Confederate artifacts. *Spirit of the Confederacy* was one of two monuments to be recommended for removal given its "perceived meaning for modern audiences."<sup>3</sup> Just as HMAAC entered the monument debate in 2020, evidence of a revived public discussion surrounds the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia's (BHMVA) tentative agreement to receive the famous equestrian statue of Confederate

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<sup>2</sup> John Guess, Jr., interview with Morgan Thomas, November 15, 2021, UH - Oral History.

<sup>3</sup> *City of Houston Confederate Items Task Force Final Report* (March 2018), 13, [https://mcusercontent.com/bbc8dea1a49ed98f626812405/files/ca0aeae1-2dd2-4ae7-bfe3-ed1d788f363d/Confederate\\_Items\\_Task\\_Force\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](https://mcusercontent.com/bbc8dea1a49ed98f626812405/files/ca0aeae1-2dd2-4ae7-bfe3-ed1d788f363d/Confederate_Items_Task_Force_Final_Report.pdf).

General Robert E. Lee. “Entrusting the future of these monuments and pedestals to two of our most respected institutions [the BHMVA and the Richmond Valentine history museum, with whom BHMVA would collaborate] is the right thing to do,” Mayor Levar Stoney asserted in January 2022.<sup>4</sup>

As disagreements around HMAAC’s acquisition and exhibition of *Spirit* indicated, communities external to academic institutions join, if not lead, conversations about what to do with contested local artifacts. As Karen L. Cox writes, “The wide variety of possible fates for these monuments should come as no surprise, because most are intensely local objects. How a city, town, or university determines the fate of its Confederate monument, or if it does anything at all, will underscore that community’s values, even when it doesn’t reflect the wishes of the entire community.”<sup>5</sup> To public historian Richard White, these community-driven initiatives define public history. “A public history is written to give information and interpretation that a public has requested, often to form the basis of a decision designed to shape the way part of the world operates,” he posits.<sup>6</sup>

This thesis operates in the spirit of public history by contextualizing a historic decision – the acquisition of a Confederate monument by an African American museum – and anticipating similar considerations of how to handle such monuments. Despite its

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<sup>4</sup> Smithsonian Magazine and Livia Gershon, “Richmond’s Robert E. Lee Statue Is Headed to a Black History Museum,” Smithsonian Magazine, accessed April 2, 2022, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/richmond-confederate-monuments-headed-to-black-history-museum-180979319/>.

<sup>5</sup> Karen L. Cox, *No Common Ground* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Richard White, “Posing the Question: What Makes Public History Public?” in *Western Lands, Western Voices: Essays on Public History in the American West*, ed. Gregory E. Smoak (University of Utah Press, 2021), 21.

programming limitations, the museum integrated *Spirit of the Confederacy* into its overarching commitment to empowering marginalized communities and facilitating multicultural conversations on race. In pondering what to do with future monuments, Black museums may use this case study as a measure for comparison.

The Houston Museum of African American Culture resulted from a challenging journey that began long before Dr. Galloway first attempted to establish an African American museum in Houston in 1988. Through its exhibitions and activism, HMAAC encapsulates the historic fight for artistic representation, justice, and equality as an African American establishment striving for public support. The discourse surrounding the museum has not always been positive; in 2004, Councilman Mark Goldberg denounced the proposed museum, writing that “it will, by its very name and purpose, serve to exclude all races and cultures except one.”<sup>7</sup> However, speaking for a historically underrepresented community and shedding light on its diversity today, HMAAC explores topics relevant to *all* Houstonians while peering through the lenses of race, social justice, education, and empowerment. The goal of ridding the nation of racial injustice has yet to be realized, but HMAAC, through acquiring *Spirit* and its efforts related to that acquisition, has moved that conversation forward in a city that both prides itself on its diversity and struggles to come to terms with it.

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Goldberg, “Houston doesn’t belong in the museum-building business,” *Houston Chronicle*, September 14, 2004, 19.

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