

America's Statue Wars Are a Family Feud

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A vandalized statue of Christopher Columbus at Seaside Park, in Bridgeport, Conn., in October. Ned Gerard/Hearst Connecticut Media, via Associated Press

Bozeman, Mont. — Just as citizens suspected of conspiring with foreign governments should be investigated and prosecuted in the present, those who committed treason in the past need not be glorified. What could be more logical than taxpayers' patriotic plea that their federal, state and municipal governments consider removing, from public property, tributes to traitors loyal to the Confederate States of America who took up arms against the United States to perpetuate the institution of slavery?

I have no qualms about tearing down bronze Confederates on government land. and I descend from one of those men. My paternal great-great-grandfather Stephen Nila Carlile served as a private in the Confederate States Army. His regiment, the First Cherokee Mounted Rifles, was formed in 1861 when the Cherokee Nation, residing in Indian Territory (in what is now eastern Oklahoma), signed a treaty of alliance with the Confederacy. The Cherokee had an understandable grudge against the United States government for removing them to the West in the 1830s.

And before that, as one of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes of the Southeast, they had been pressured to cede their hunting lands and trade in their traditional matrilineal system for Christianity, male dominance and commercial agriculture as practiced

in the 19th-century South. Which is to say, they owned slaves. So when they traipsed the Trail of Tears, their slaves marched with them.

As far as I know, Private Carlile, an illiterate, did not own slaves. But he would marry into a fancier Cherokee family that did. His future brother-in-law Pleasant Napoleon Blackstone fought for the Confederates in the Battle of Honey Springs in 1863. It was the largest battle fought in Indian Territory. White soldiers made up a minority of combatants. Cherokee, Creek and Choctaw Confederates fought a Union coalition of the Indian Home Guard (including Delaware, Seneca and Shawnee, plus some rogue pro-Lincoln Cherokees) as well as the First Kansas Colored Infantry, one of the first black units in the war to engage in combat. Uncle Pleasant was wounded but commended for killing one of these heroes.

The family scuttlebutt is that Private Carlile shuttled messages between Cherokee Confederates and their Choctaw allies. After the war, by the way, a freed slave once owned by Indian Territory Choctaws probably composed the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” — a piece of trivia that pretty much sums up American history: hideous memories and beautiful songs.

I have fantasized about sawing the Confederates off my family tree, thereby whittling the branches down to Swedish Baptists who would frown upon my godless, low-key life. But it’s worth noting that my Confederate relatives were not American traitors. They were volunteers from another sovereign state.

Meanwhile, the Cherokee Nation has also been [debating](#) whether to remove two Confederate monuments on the grounds of the Cherokee Courthouse in the nation’s capital of Tahlequah, including a tribute to Private Carlile’s commander, [Gen. Stand Watie](#).

In October, the Cherokee Courthouse was the rallying point for a march to observe Indigenous Peoples’ Day, meant to replace Columbus Day’s celebration of conquest with appreciation for the Americas’ original inhabitants. Standing in front of the courthouse, Candessa Tehee, a professor at Northeastern State University, told The Cherokee Phoenix, “To celebrate Columbus is to celebrate an individual who is one of the first documented slave traders of North America.” She is correct, but it is not boring that she said this while standing on the same lawn as the monuments to Cherokee Confederates.

Let’s stop and indulge in a moment of nostalgia for the good old days of, oh, six months ago when the question was whether to dismantle taxpayer-maintained statues of traitors like Robert E. Lee — and the answer was clear to every citizen and elected official mature enough to accept a female Doctor Who. All subsequent arguments on which monuments to heave into the landfill of history are going to be murkier and will surely lay bare what an exasperating country General Lee failed to destroy.

Take Christopher Columbus. Announcing a task force to review New York City monuments “that in any way may suggest hate or division or racism,” Mayor Bill de Blasio described the honoree of Columbus Circle as “complicated, to say the least.”

Yet I wonder how many of the nation’s many Columbus memorials were truly built as tributes to a navigationally challenged slavemonger. How many were instead put up by Italian-American civic organizations as a rebuke to decades of discrimination and violence and as a reminder to their neighbors that Italians have been here since this objectionable Genoa-born adventurer set foot in this hemisphere in 1492, well before a bunch of equally creepy blond Protestants followed in his wake?

Between 1886 and 1915, at least 46 Italian immigrants were lynched in Mississippi, Florida, Illinois, West Virginia, Colorado and elsewhere, including the [11 slain by a New Orleans mob in 1891](#) after some of them had been tried for murder and acquitted. After 1915, when D. W. Griffith’s “The Birth of a Nation” reinvigorated the Ku Klux Klan, Italian-Americans joined blacks and Jews on the terrorists’ list of targets.

So while Columbus, as Mayor de Blasio put it politically, “may suggest hate,” how many of his statues were originally put up to tone down hate? I nevertheless suspect that some of the increasingly vandalized Columbus edifices are not long for this world, but Italian-Americans will make themselves heard about what replaces them. I see many a Columbus monument’s future, and its name is Bruce Springsteen.

Going forward, public commissions devoted to sorting out this quagmire should look to Maya Lin’s Confluence Project in the Pacific Northwest. Six sites along the Columbia River in Washington and Oregon commemorate the Lewis and Clark expedition from the point of view of the people and ecology the explorers encountered. I’ve been to the “bird blind” in the woods of the Sandy River Delta outside Portland, an elegant, elliptical treehouse composed of wooden slats engraved with the names of the animal species the Corps of Discovery documented, some of them now labeled extinct, endangered or a “species of concern.”

The visitor brings everything she knows or does not know. I know that when William Clark camped nearby in November 1805, he “could not sleep” because of the “horrid” noise of swans, geese and ducks. I know Captain Clark’s slave York accompanied

him on the voyage.

I know that Sacagawea was Shoshone and that she was captured as a child by the Hidatsa and that the hopeful hordes who followed in her traveling companions' footsteps in the subsequent decades were not to be good news for the Shoshone or the Hidatsa. I know that the Louisiana Purchase Lewis and Clark marveled at is where the United States government would shoo some of my forebears when they were spat out of the East, and that even though a fourth of them died along the way, the Cherokee Nation still has the largest population of any American Indian tribe, close to 360,000 enrolled members, and I am one of them.

Knowing none of that, a lighthearted visitor could also just stand still in Maya Lin's humble contraption and be only delighted, ogling the sky between her wood slats and listening to the birds that kept William Clark up at night, reliving none of the hideous memories and hearing only the beautiful songs.