

Another Way of Taking Down Robert E. Lee and Re-imagining the “Lee” Circle in Richmond

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After a tumultuous Spring tearing down images of a not-too-honorable history, opportunities abound for us to re-imagine our history within the ideals we learned long ago in school, “We hold these truths to be self-evident...life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Now’s the time to re-imagine opportunities within the soon-to-be old Robert E. Lee Circle in Richmond.

I drove from Washington, DC to Richmond to add my voice to take-down the General Robert E. Lee statue last Saturday and Sunday. What I found, in addition to angry citizens protesting the murder of George Floyd, was a festive teach-in. During my two-day visit, thousands of people flowed in and out of the Monument Avenue circle park where Lee stands high on his horse on a pedestal spray painted with every colorful slogan expressing an end to police brutality, racism and white supremacy. Everyone was having their picture taken in front of the maligned general. But there was more.

In every curve in the circle there were shade tents erected promoting literature on topics from vegan life-styles and recipes to massages to gardening to Black Studies. There were petition drives on Climate Change, voter-suppression and voter registration. There was a First-Aid station and an array of free food and water tables as well as picnic grillers showing off their culinary outdoor skills next to families lounging on picnic blankets. There was music everywhere and speeches non-stop. Angry at police brutality, yes. But more a love-in of ideas, causes, cathartic exhales with the most diverse crowd I have ever seen in the South. In the words of the sixties poet Bob Dylan, “Something is happening here but I don’t know what it is, do you Mrs. Jones?”

It then hit me! Wait a minute - if we take down ole Robert - this festive New-World celebration might go away. So I have a different idea.

I suggest leaving up the colorful educational pedestal and the horse, after-all the horse didn’t know that he was being used and abused to further slavery, but cut-off the torso of Lee. I would recommend African American iron-workers be given the pleasure of dismounting him ceremoniously. Leave the pedestal and horse as a symbol of the power and courage of the people in a movement toward a more perfect union, a more just society and an end to white supremacy. Collect the placards and inspirational signage once a month, house them in historical collection and exhibit them once a year to celebrate a victory over racism. Use them to inspire school children to create more art to end a culture of violence. Leave the pedestal, take the torso - a third way to deal with the offending symbol.

Further, I would suggest the city of Richmond and the State of Virginia erect within the circle park four statues facing East, West, North and South of African American women. African American women have been the most violently abused in our white supremacist nation for 401 years. To the East - Harriet Tubman. To the West - Ida B. Wells. To the North - Sojourner Truth. And to the South - Mary McLeod Bethune. Erect an iron bench at pedestal base. Seated at one end of the bench Maggie Walker, the great African American woman born in Richmond known to have established the first Black bank in America. The rest of the bench leave open for people to sit with Maggie to relax, read and have their photo taken with her. Leave the pedestal and the horse as a tribute. Erect African American women as a reminder of who really made America great. Let stand the park pedestal as a rallying Mecca for love, diversity, knowledge and the power of the people chanting non-stop “No justice, no peace.”

The new circle could be called a *Truth Telling Circle*. At each Black woman statue facing her place of origin, erect a semi-circle of seating honoring the Griot teaching semi-circles in West Africa. Incorporate signage around the circle to tell the true stories of how Black women helped build this nation into a more perfect union. I would suggest the Governor convene a fundraising committee to fund this project starting with the banks (Maggie Walker inspired), then hair product companies. The big banks and corporations need to step up. Ask the AKAs and Deltas to lead the fundraising efforts. Probably millions of people would contribute to a Go-Fund-Me effort for the above.

Lastly, I would suggest melting down the metal of the ole General and sculpt it into statues of *Black Girl Magic Double-Dutch* and/or Serena Williams acing Arthur Ashe, Richmond native, with a hundred mile-an-hour serve, (please, no disrespect to Mr. Ashe).

Americans are looking for positive motions coming out of a tumultuous Spring. They are yearning for good news, good stories to tell and good projects to fund. Richmond is a place and space of enormous history yearning to be told more truthfully. Such a circle would be a boom to the city's already popular history and cultural tourism.

History hurts, but if taught properly in can also educate, rectify, empower and heal. Let us not just tear down, let us build up. And the truth will, indeed, set us free. America, listen to Black women!

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