

Featured: A monument to the Confederate statues of Athens-Clarke County stands in the middle of Broad Street. The monument was erected in 1872 by the Athens Ladies Memorial Association. "At the time, the males couldn't go around doing things like that because they had just lost a war and had some restrictions," Johnson said. "It was basically an army of women going around trying to change the narrative around what succession was about and make their way of life look more moral than it actually was."



CONFRONTING HISTORY

A monument to Confederate soldiers has stood in Downtown Athens for over a century, but local activists are now working to move the monument out of the city center.

BY ELENA GILBERTSON-HALL
News staffer

In the bustling heart of Downtown Athens, directly across from the University of Georgia's Arch, an overlooked obelisk stands for the fallen Confederate soldiers of Clarke County.

A local debate regarding Athens' Confederate monument was sparked in response to violent events in Charlottesville, Virginia in August regarding a monument of Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

According to The New York Times, "A white nationalist rally in Charlottesville brought renewed attention to dozens of Confederate monuments around the country. Many government officials have called to remove statues, markers and other monuments that celebrate controversial Civil War era figures from public grounds. There are likely hundreds of such monuments in the United States."

In a city and region where remnants of the Confederacy, including buildings and streets named after Confederate leaders, are common, local activists have decided to focus their efforts on moving the "Soldier's Monument" on Broad Street. The monument, erected in 1872 by the Athens Ladies' Memorial Association, is one of the oldest monuments to the Confederacy in Georgia.

"These heroes, ours in the unity of blood, ours in the unity of patriotism, struggled for the rights of states as held by the fathers of the republic," the inscription on the monument reads, "Last and holiest office of human fidelity possible to brave men attesting their sincerity, proving their honor and sealing their integrity."

Organizations such as the ALMA worked to rewrite the narrative surrounding the Civil War, forming the "Lost Cause" storyline to suggest that

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University of Georgia Associate Professor of history

southern soldiers were not fighting for the right to own slaves.

According to the UGA Associate Professor of history Akela Reason, some monuments erected to commemorate the Confederacy were intended to do more than remember the fallen.

"There is a reasonable desire to commemorate the dead, but I think that to continue to support these monuments is to turn a blind eye to history," Reason said. "These were not erected solely to commemorate the dead. They were erected as an act of defiance and as a means of perpetuating White supremacy."

The Athens monument is a highly controversial topic, with some members of the community arguing for the removal of the monument and others maintaining that the monument should stay in place.

"I despise (Confederate monuments), as someone who knows they were not created to include me. They were created specifically to exclude me and to ostracize my people -- Black people," Athens Anti-Discrimination Movement (AADM) publicist

Richard Banton said. "It is a monument making a statement about how I don't have an equal right to exist."

Co-founder of the AADM Knowa Johnson feels that although many residents consider Athens a 'liberal bubble', that is not evident when driving into town on Broad Street.

"It doesn't feel good to pay taxes in a city and to be a patron of a city that allows (a Confederate monument) to be on public property," Johnson said. "It doesn't make a statement of inclusivity or diversity or that we even want to be inclusive. There (could be) something there that represents the city and where we're trying to go."

However, not all members of the community view Confederate monuments as offensive or exclusive symbols.

"I see monuments to the Confederacy the same as monuments to the Union. It's just commemorating people that fought for their side of the war," Clarke Central High School junior Patrick Madrid said. "I don't think it's like, 'Here's a statue that supports slavery', I just think it's more, 'Here's a statue of an American who fought for what he believed in.' Whether morally that's justified or not is a different argument."

However, monuments such as this one are often seen as important historical objects and some argue that moving it would disregard its significance.

"(The monument) pays a reverence to those who gave the ultimate sacrifice. They sacrificed for their communities. These guys defended Athens, they loved Athens," Lieutenant Commander of the Sons of Confederate Veterans T.R.R. Cobb Camp Curt Collier said. "(Moving the monument) is erasing history. I don't want any monuments torn down."

Lynae Sowinski, an attendant at an AADM meeting regarding the monument, believes that the

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monument only represents a certain part of history.

"I don't think (the monument) is representing true history in the first place. History was written by a very specific, White male population and they are leaving out narratives that need to be included," Sowinski said. "The very act of (the monument) being there is erasing history."

Georgia native Peggy Galis has several ancestors who were slaveholding Confederate soldiers, but Galis believes that their lives can be commemorated without being glorified.

"There's no question that the South fought for slavery, and that's something we should be ashamed of. And I am ashamed of it. And certainly my family (were slaveholders)," Galis said. "But they can be in cemeteries and I visit my family in the cemetery. They don't need to be held up to the community-at-large as heroes."

This issue was divisive among political candidates in the race for Georgia State House of Representatives district 117. Losing candidate for district 117 Houston Gaines vocally supported the Georgia law limiting the relocation of Confederate monuments.

"I would support maintaining that statute (protecting Confederate monuments). I'm someone who is for adding to our history and not taking away from it," Gaines said in a debate.

The AADM has contacted the ACC mayor and commission to urge the issue to be put on the mayor and commission meeting agenda for public input and ultimately for the monument to be moved.

"Our attorney is researching this issue. Georgia law prohibits the removal or defacing of monuments on public land," Mayor Nancy Denson said after declining to put the issue on the agenda. "Further complicating the question is ownership of the actual monument. It sits on (Department of Transportation) right of way, state of Georgia ownership. At this time, there are no options for the Commission to debate."

Georgia law section 50-30-1 states that no publicly-owned monument on the public property of the state in honor of the military service of any past or present military personnel shall be relocated, removed, concealed, obscured or altered as long as the appropriate measures for the preservation, protection and interpretation of such monuments or memorials shall not be prohibited.

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The law provides an opportunity for local governments that deem it necessary to relocate monuments "for the preservation, protection, and interpretation of such monuments" to do so. Many community activists suggest that this argument could be reasonably applied to the Broad Street monument.

"(The monument) had to be completely reconstructed two or three years ago and rebuilt. To adequately preserve the monument for future generations, people argue, and I argue, that a more appropriate place for it to be would be Oconee Hill Cemetery," local attorney Russell Edwards said. "If we really want to preserve this monument and have it last a long time, we need to remove it from this corridor that is so heavily trafficked."

The monument was first unveiled on College Avenue before being moved to its current location in the traffic median on Broad Street.

"This monument was already moved several times in its history, so I think there's a perception that it's always been there, but it hasn't. It could very easily be moved somewhere else," Reason said.

Some activists hope to get the monument moved to Oconee Hill Cemetery, a cemetery which houses a number of Confederate graves.

"We're not honoring something they accomplished. We're honoring that they fought and died so it should be a tombstone, basically. You honor someone who died on a tombstone, and you don't honor people who lose wars, people that divided a country," Johnson said. "Those are not usual things to honor people for but the Confederacy found a way to do it."

One option that has been discussed is to not only move the Confederate monument, but also replace it with one that is more inclusive.

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Clarke Central High School junior

"We should move this monument and put a monument that more accurately reflects the historical reality that would actually serve the community by telling the full story of the Civil War instead of just this one-sided glorification of the rebels," Edwards said. "We don't commemorate the Holocaust by preserving statues of Adolf Hitler."

As the community continues the dialogue around this issue, the mayor and commission are awaiting legal advice before taking action.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the majority of the commission is in favor of moving it. It's the question of the legality and what argument the county attorney presents as to what the state law is," ACC Commissioner Melissa Link said. "There is stuff going on behind the scenes to find out what the legal and appropriate steps to take are."

Whatever the solution, Link believes the community must engage in a civil discussion to avoid a situation similar to the violent Charlottesville protests.

"The last thing anyone wants is to see is this (monument) come down violently in a riot," Link said. "If we can have a peaceful, logical discussion about the fate of this object we can show the rest of the world how to do it. We can't just ignore it. Bad things happen when you ignore stuff like that."



Opposite top left: MOVING THE MONUMENT: Co-founder of the Athens Anti-Discrimination Movement Knowa Johnson stands in front of Athens' most prominent Confederate monument. The AADM has been working to move the monument since violent events in Charlottesville, Virginia regarding a Confederate statue. "We wanted to do it different here in Athens, we felt like we could sit down with people who had different opinions and come up with a solution that we could all agree on and understand," Johnson said. **Opposite top right:**

LOOPHOLE IN THE LAW: Some local Athens activists are attempting to move the Confederate monument on Broad Street. Georgia law prohibits the movement of monuments to the Confederacy except for safety and preservation purposes. "The fact that (the monument) has been cracked before and the city has had to come in and repair it, that's probability that it can happen again," co-founder of the Athens Anti-Discrimination Movement Knowa Johnson said. **Opposite bottom left: NAMES OF THE FALLEN:** The obelisk on Broad Street recognizes the soldiers of Athens-Clarke County that died on the behalf of the Confederacy during the Civil War. Some members of the community believe the monument represents the cause of slavery. "This monument promotes a one-sided view of history that commemorates the sacrifice of southern soldiers in a noble light, when in reality these soldiers fought to preserve the institution of slavery and we should try to come correct with our history so we can move forward and recognize the south was wrong," local attorney Russell Edwards said. **Opposite bottom right: HOLDING ON TO HISTORY:** The community has engaged in dialogue regarding Athens' Confederate monument. Some members of the community believe the monument is an important memorialization of history. "It pays a reverence to those who gave the ultimate sacrifice. They sacrificed for their communities and the same goes for all the wars since then," Lieutenant Commander of the Sons of Confederate Veterans T.R.R. Cobb Camp Collier said. All photos by Zoe Peterson



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