

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/lynchburg-lawmakers-reluctant-to-remove-confederate-monuments/article_7753e6f0-3590-57d1-bd5d-030c489a72ef.html

Lynchburg lawmakers reluctant to remove Confederate monuments

Richard Chumney
Mar 7, 2020



The Confederate statue at Monument Terrace in Lynchburg on Wednesday, March 4, 2020.

photos by Taylor Irby/The News & Advance

Nearly five years after a massacre of black church-goers in South Carolina sparked a renewed reckoning over Confederate symbols in American life, legislation recently approved by the Virginia General Assembly soon may give local

governments the chance to remove monuments to the Confederacy.

But interviews with Lynchburg lawmakers suggest the Confederate monuments that dot the Hill City will not come down any time soon. Of the seven elected representatives who sit on city council, none said the memorials should be torn down.

“I’m not one who wants to wipe out history,” Mayor Treney Tweedy said. “I’d rather we learn from it, so as not to repeat it.”

Tweedy, the first black woman to serve as mayor in Lynchburg, said the council should focus on “bigger issues,” including approving long-term infrastructure projects and investing in public safety.

“I want to keep the important issues at the forefront of our spending and consideration,” she said.

Tweedy’s sentiment was echoed by the vast majority of the council. Only Beau Wright, the youngest and newest member, said he has not yet made up his mind about the issue.

“I think this is really complicated, and it doesn’t lend itself to easy answers,” Wright said. “I’m still giving it a lot of thought.”

Ward IV council member Turner Perrow was adamant in his support for the monuments. He said the statues to Confederate soldiers hold deep meaning for Lynchburg residents, especially among those descended from Civil War veterans.

“The monuments in Lynchburg are to the people who served,” Perrow, who is not seeking reelection, said. “They didn’t do it for ideological reasons, they did it because that’s what they were asked to do. And I think we should respect anybody that steps up when they’re called to serve.”

vvv

Confederate monuments once again are grabbing headlines in Virginia.

On Saturday, both chambers of the General Assembly voted to repeal a decades-old law barring localities in the state from removing war monuments from public property.

The new legislation gives local governments the right to vote to remove, relocate, contextualize or cover monuments to war veterans. It also gives localities the option of holding a non-binding referendum on the matter before taking any action.

The bill now goes to the desk of Gov. Ralph Northam, who has already pledged to sign it into law.

Supporters of the monuments believe the structures celebrate those who fought bravely for their homeland during the Civil War. But opponents said they are vestiges of a racist past that distort the reality of a war that left hundreds of thousands dead.

“The monuments themselves are not history, they are representations of history,” said Adam Dean, a professor of history at the University of Lynchburg.

Dean noted many of the monuments were built at the turn of the 20th century, following the failure of Reconstruction and as Confederate veterans began to die off. From the beginning, he said, the memorials reflected the re-emerging political power of southern whites.

“Most Confederate monuments are monuments of the “Lost Cause” version of the Civil War,” Dean said. “The theory held that the Civil War was not about slavery, it was about state rights, which would certainly surprise people in 1861.”

Dean supports the legislation that would give localities the power to control their statues, however, he believes the conversation about removal should be more nuanced. Monuments explicitly endorsing the Lost Cause narrative should be taken down, he said, but others should continue to stand as long as they are properly contextualized by museums and historians.

Joyce Dixon, the president of the board of directors of the Legacy Museum of African American History, said Lynchburg must do a better job of addressing Confederate history.

“Some history is actually hurtful,” Dixon said. “I think we really need to sit down and evaluate how we’re telling these stories.”

With 110 monuments, Virginia has the second-highest number of memorials to the Confederacy in the United States after Georgia, according to a 2019 study by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Statues depicting Gen. Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville and Confederate President Jefferson Davis in Richmond have fueled years of debate about their place on public grounds.

In Lynchburg — a place of major strategic importance to the Confederate States of America during the Civil War — monuments can be found across the city.

Among the most recognizable is a statue at the top of Monument Terrace meant to memorialize Confederate soldiers killed in battle. Erected by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1900, the bronze figure has become an iconic landmark for many city residents.

Others see it as a testament to white supremacy. The statue stands just a few dozen feet from the entrance to Lynchburg Circuit Court — an important municipal building that draws thousands of people each year.

Local resident Marissa Gray said Confederate symbols should not be allowed to stand in public settings and should be removed.

“Owning people is not heritage and that’s what they were fighting for,” Gray said as she left the court complex on a recent afternoon. “They were fighting for hate.”

Elsewhere in the city, monuments to the Confederacy are given a prominent place in public spaces.

An obelisk honoring Gen. Jubal Early, a key figure in the Lost Cause movement who in 1864 helped beat back a Union invasion of Lynchburg, stands at the corner of Memorial and Fort avenues.

At Miller Park, a stone structure celebrating the 2nd Virginia Cavalry stands under a towering oak tree while a statue of John Warwick Daniel, a Confederate veteran who pushed to disenfranchise black voters as a U.S. Senator, sits at 9th Street and Park Ave.

At-large Councilman Randy Nelson, who penned a op-ed for The News & Advance on the topic of monuments in 2017, argued that without reminders of tragic moments in history, those living in the present may be prone to repeat them.

“To not understand where we were and how far we’ve come, diminishes the things that got us here,” Nelson said.

v v v

The exact number of the city’s Confederate monuments is not fully known. In anticipation of the new laws governing monuments, the Lynchburg Museum has begun cataloging each memorial, according to its director, Ted Delaney.

Delaney said researchers have had a difficult time determining what qualifies as a Confederate monument.

For example, should the remains of a packet boat that once carried the body of Gen. Stonewall Jackson from Lynchburg to his final resting place in Lexington be considered a memorial? The hull of the boat is displayed at Riverside Park and a case can be made that the boat is more of an exhibit than monument, Delaney said.

Delaney is no stranger to the controversy surrounding Confederate symbols. In January, following nearly two years of debate, the museum displayed a Confederate battle flag on loan from the American Civil War Museum in Richmond.

Delaney said the experience convinced him the community should play a direct role in any decision made about the city’s monuments.

“The biggest lesson for me is how important it is to have a thoughtful, deliberate process where people are given facts, they’re informed and they’re given a chance to reflect on this issue,” he said.

The Lynchburg museum is not the only local institution that has wrestled with the monuments issue. Just two weeks after a 2017 white nationalist rally in Charlottesville descended into violence, Randolph College removed a statue of George Morgan Jones, a Confederate private who was instrumental in the founding of the college, and placed it in storage.

“The College has no connection to the Confederacy and, thus, the presence of a statue glorifying a Confederate soldier has no obvious place on our campus,” Bradley Bateman, the president of the college, said at the time.

All six candidates for city council in the upcoming May 5 election were united in their belief the monuments should continue to stand.

Vice Mayor MaryJane Dolan, Ward II Councilman Sterling Wilder and Ward III Councilman Jeff Helgeson, the three incumbents running for reelection, each equated removing the statues to erasing history.

Chris Faraldi, who is hoping to succeed Perrow in Ward IV, believes a compromise between supporters and opponents of the push to remove monuments can be reached. He called for building new statues to non-white Lynchburgers.

“Let’s put up statues from our diverse past,” Faraldi, a Republican, said. “I think we should be elevating people in our history regardless of their skin color.”

Abe Loper, a GOP-backed candidate running to unseat Dolan in Ward I, agreed with Faraldi about the need to erect new monuments to marginalized figures from history.

Though Loper personally believes the existing monuments should continue to stand, he said their fate ultimately should be left to Lynchburg voters in a citywide referendum.

“I believe that whenever possible, government should pass decisions to the community,” Loper said.

Larry Jones, an army veteran running as an independent for the Ward IV seat, said he is not bothered by the monuments. Like Loper, he believes the decision to remove the structures should be up to the voters.

Independent Larry Taylor said city council should spend its time on more pressing issues.

“They’re statues. That’s part of history,” Taylor, a candidate for Ward II, said. “I grew up around the Lee statue in Charlottesville. I walked past it every day and it didn’t stunt my growth.”

Richard Chumney covers Liberty University for The News & Advance. Reach him at (434) 385-5547.

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/despite-rumors-still-no-covid-19-cases-in-lynchburg-or-surrounding-counties/article_eaac98d1-7685-5132-989f-f161c2074fe4.html

Despite rumors, still no COVID-19 cases in Lynchburg or surrounding counties

Richard Chumney
Mar 19, 2020



Dr. Kerry Gateley, director of the Central Virginia Health District, speaks during a news conference at City Hall in Lynchburg on Thursday, March 12, 2020.

Taylor Irby/The News & Advance/

Lynchburg's public health director Thursday sought to dispel mounting fear the coronavirus pandemic had reached the Hill City, telling the public in a news conference that media reports this week were "based on erroneous information."

“As it stands, we do not have any confirmed cases here,” said Dr. Kerry Gateley, the director of the Central Virginia Health District, which encompasses Lynchburg and the counties of Amherst, Appomattox, Bedford and Campbell.

Gateley’s unconventional announcement came one day after a handful of television and radio news outlets in the Lynchburg region circulated reports not confirmed by the health department an employee at a local J. Crew distribution center had tested positive for COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

The media reports were based on a company bulletin sent early Wednesday morning in which employees were wrongly notified a distribution center worker had received a “preliminary positive” result and the more than 400,000-square-foot warehouse would close temporarily for a deep cleaning.

The media reports puzzled local health officials, Gateley said, and helped fuel anxiety among residents concerned about the growing health threat.

As of Thursday afternoon’s press conference, no commercial or public testing labs have recorded any preliminary positive COVID-19 results for patients in Lynchburg or in the neighboring counties, according to Gateley.

Private health care providers are mandated by law to report positive test results to the Virginia Department of Health. Even if a test was conducted in a different region or state, the local health district where the patient lives and works would still be notified.

After struggling to get in touch with J. Crew leadership for hours, health officials finally spoke with company representatives Wednesday night. According to Gateley, the company’s incorrect message to staff was the result of a series of “mistakes and misunderstandings.”

The inaccurate media reports prompted alarmed residents to flood health officials and hospital operators with dozens of calls Wednesday and Thursday.

Gateley said the confusion helped tie up employees working to prepare for the anticipated spread of the disease. He noted any announcements regarding a local coronavirus case would come directly from health officials.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for anybody — whether it’s the media or businesses or politicians — to get out in front of the health department,” Gateley said.

WSET, a local ABC affiliate owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group, was among the first outlets to share the unconfirmed report. Officials at the station declined to comment on the decision Thursday.

Marcus Messner, the interim director of the Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture at Virginia Commonwealth University, said news outlets have a responsibility to confirm facts with the proper authorities before reporting on the coronavirus outbreak.

“While the anxiety level is really high during this crisis, the same standards should apply,” he said. “Journalists should be the calm in the storm and the information sources that people can rely on.”

In a statement to employees Thursday, J. Crew officials said the distribution center was closed on Wednesday out of an abundance of caution and that it had since reopened.

“We learned today that the Virginia Department of Health’s latest information is that there has not yet been a confirmed positive case in the Lynchburg area,” J. Crew officials wrote in part. “We will continue to be vigilant and supportive of our associates.”

The News & Advance was not invited to participate in the health department’s press conference Thursday. When asked why the newspaper was excluded, Gateley said the conference was hastily arranged with various television stations which had initially scheduled one-on-one interviews. The News & Advance did not publish reports on the unconfirmed COVID-19 case.

At the same time health officials attempted to ease concerns at the press conference, they warned residents to prepare for local COVID-19 cases in the near future. As of Thursday evening, there are more than 90 presumptive and confirmed cases in Virginia, including three in Charlottesville and one in the Roanoke region.

“Positive reports will be reported,” Haley Evans, an epidemiologist for the local health district, said. “We are not keeping results a secret. We don’t have any positive results from this area yet, although we do expect we will see them.”

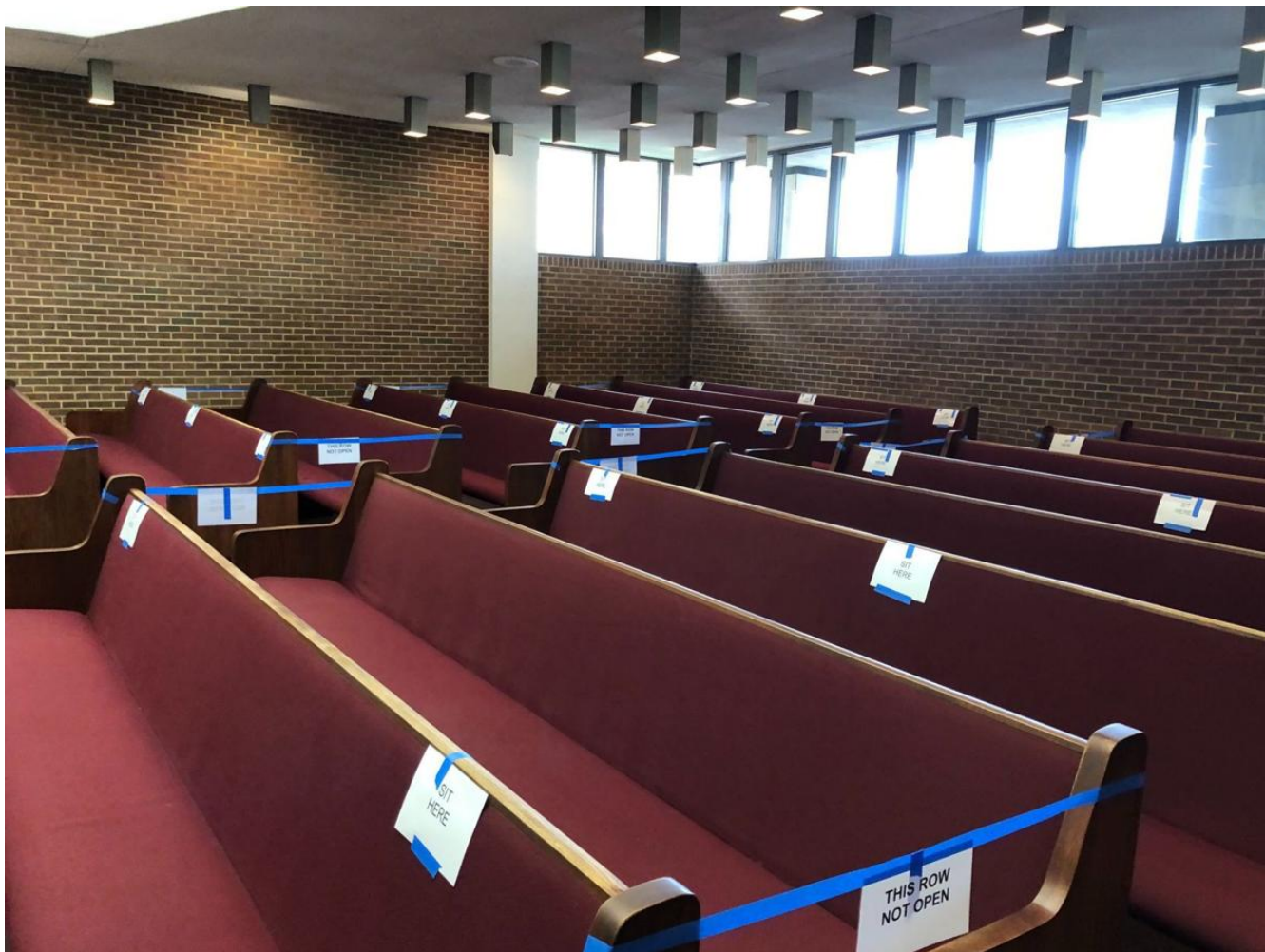
Richard Chumney covers Liberty University for The News & Advance. Reach him at (434) 385-5547.

Richard Chumney covers Liberty University for The News & Advance. Reach him at (434) 385-5547.

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/more-than-three-dozen-face-eviction-as-lynchburg-courts-reopen/article_f50cfb7c-b878-5d3f-80f9-5ec4223381d8.html

More than three dozen face eviction as Lynchburg courts reopen

Richard Chumney
May 18, 2020



A courtroom in Lynchburg General District is shown during an afternoon recess. Court officials marked off seating to ensure social distancing as eviction cases resumed on Monday, May 18, 2020.

Richard Chumney

Three dozen Lynchburg households were ordered to vacate their homes Monday as eviction hearings resumed for the first time since the coronavirus pandemic forced courts to cancel routine business.

Courthouses across Virginia have largely been closed to the public for much of the last two months because of the health threat. But on Friday a statewide order suspending non-emergency proceedings expired, paving the way for a backlog of eviction lawsuits to move forward this week.

Over the course of Monday morning and afternoon, Lynchburg General District Court Chief Judge Sam Eggleston III heard 90 eviction lawsuits — the most of any court in Virginia, according to a review of online court records.

The vast majority of the cases were dismissed or postponed to a later date. But Eggleston ruled in favor of landlords and their representatives in 36 cases.

Tenant advocates tried desperately to put a stop to the day's eviction hearings to no avail.

Both the Virginia Legal Aid Society and the Virginia Poverty Law Center asked the Virginia Supreme Court on Friday night to delay the resumption of eviction hearings, arguing local courts had not given enough notice about the proceedings and that evicted tenants could face severe health risks. Despite the plea, the state's high court took no action.

“In the face of the Governor's stay in place order that is in effect until June 10th, tenants will be forced to violate that order and seek alternative housing, go fill out applications, view properties and put them and their families at heightened risk,” David Neumeyer, the executive director of Virginia Legal Aid Society, said in a statement. “It will produce the exact opposite of the purpose of the stay at home order for those who will no longer have a home.”

Eggleston, who signed a local order Friday ordering non-emergency cases in the Lynchburg region to resume, said he believed the court had taken the necessary safety precautions ahead of Monday's hearings.

Under the order issued by Eggleston, courthouse visitors were required to undergo temperature checks and answer general health questions before entering the building. They also were required to maintain 6 feet of distance from others and sit in marked

areas in the courtroom gallery.

Masks were recommended but not mandated and only about a third of the more than 170 people who visited the courthouse could be seen wearing the protective coverings.

“What people expect when they come to court is a resolution of their problem and that’s what we’re trying to do,” Eggleston said. “We’re trying to do business and be as careful as we can about it. We hope somebody doesn’t come in here and give somebody else a case of COVID.”

Though the sweeping statewide order halting evictions has expired, there are still pandemic-related protections in place for certain tenants. For example, residents who have lost their income as a result of the virus can request a delay in an eviction hearing, as one tenant learned Monday.

Tenants who live in federally subsidized housing or in a property with a federally backed mortgage also are protected from eviction through mid-summer as part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, or CARES Act.

That aspect of the still relatively new federal relief law came as a surprise to the representatives of The Meadows, an apartment complex off Langhorne Road, who were forced to watch Eggleston dismiss two eviction lawsuits filed against tenants with federally provided housing vouchers.

J.D. Fairchild, a lawyer for The Meadows, said he understood the challenges facing renters but argued the current tenant protections put an unfair burden on landlords.

“The reason that my clients are here is because they have bills and they have a mortgage,” Fairchild said. “People have a duty to take care of themselves and part of taking care of yourself is paying your rent. Landlords are just as at risk of losing what they have as tenants are.”

Even before the pandemic, the problem of evictions was especially acute in Lynchburg.

Renters in the Hill City are threatened with eviction at rates more than three and a half times higher than the national average, according to an analysis of court records conducted last year by the Virginia Legal Aid Society.

In 2016 alone, more than 1,200 families — nearly 9% of the city's renting population — faced the prospect of losing their homes.

Eviction hearings will continue to move forward this week. On Wednesday, the court is scheduled to hear another 42 lawsuits.

Richard Chumney covers Liberty University for The News & Advance. Reach him at (434) 385-5547.