

Few Confederate monuments moved in far Southwest VA

JOE TENNIS

BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Political winds blew primarily in a southerly direction across the mountains and valleys of Southwest Virginia, during the run-up to and during the Civil War.

History reminds us that some 17,000 men from the area west of Roanoke served in the Confederate army, with about a fourth dying in battle or from disease.

There were few battles in the region. After Union forces defeated Confederates in Kingsport they marched to Bristol and secured the railroad lines in East Tennessee in 1864. They then moved through Southwest Virginia, with battles occurring in Marion and Saltville.

Lee County, a pathway to the north and neutral Kentucky, was the site of multiple skirmishes near Cumberland Gap and Jonesville, with Union forces burning the Lee County Courthouse in 1863.

Statutes erected a century or more ago

to the memory of Southwest Virginia's Confederate soldiers are still standing, although some aren't in their original location.

Nearly all were erected in the early 1900s, decades after the Civil War ended. For many, these statues just blended into the scenery of everyday life.

But not for everyone.

"There were people who could fondly remember the Civil War generations later," said Brian McKnight, a professor of history and director of the Center for Appalachian Studies at the University of Virginia's College at Wise. "A lot of it is more of a romanticized memory."

A new wave of awareness of the Confederate statues — and opposition to them — emerged across Virginia in 2020 amid widespread protests following the death of George Floyd, a Black man, at the hands of white police in Minneapolis.

Please see **MONUMENTS** , Page A4

Monuments

From A1

Detractors see the statues as offensive and symbols of clinging to a hurtful and outdated past. Locally, few were actually relocated.

"I think it's very much up to the local community to make that decision," McKnight said. "I think in the public spaces, whatever we put in public spaces needs to reflect the interest and concerns of all those citizens. If there's an element of the citizenry that doesn't find them suitable, I think that element needs to be heard."

Washington County

The most notable removal was the statue of a soldier from near the entrance of the historic Washington County Courthouse in Abingdon. That statue originally stood at the center of the town's Main Street — on Courthouse Hill — as early as 1907, just 42 years following the end of the Civil War. It was moved to the courthouse lawn in the 1930s because cars kept running into it.

It was originally erected by the Daughters of the Confederacy.

With a major courthouse renovation and expansion on the drawing board, the soldier and another Confederate statue's location came into question during some public hearings.

Washington County officials lobbied Abingdon leaders to have the statue moved to the town's highly visible Veterans Memorial Park overlooking Cummings Street. But the town council turned deaf ears to those requests — even refusing to make statements on whether the statue could be relocated to the park.

Despite some voices spoken against the statue's presence at the courthouse, the official line from county officials is that the monuments were moved to make way for the courthouse's expansion and renovation.

At its Dec. 14, 2021, meeting, the Board of Supervisors unanimously voted to relocate the Civil War monuments next to the Washington County government center.

The statue was placed there with a sidewalk leading to it and the other monument.

Its pedestal is inscribed, "Our mothers, wives, daughters and sisters."

The other monument recognizes five Civil War generals who were all born in the county.

The public donated \$140,000 for the relocation and the new space was named "Common Soldier Park." A dedication ceremony was held in June 2022.

"We would welcome any veterans group that would like to be involved in our Common Soldier Park," County Supervisor Charlie Hargis said during the 2022 ceremony. "The Confederate statue is the focal point, but it is also the beginning."

For Ruth Anne Holley, a member of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the statues are a reminder of what her family fought to defend, from their land to their faith and their state's rights.

"They fought to protect their families. That's what they fought for. They fought for their farms, land. They fought for their families, blood. And they fought for the Christian faith. This was a Christian culture. It wasn't multi-cultural. It was a Christian culture, predominantly protestant," Holley said. "The Confederate soldier fought for his land for his people in his country. His country was his state."

Washington County Administrator Jason Berry said previously that work on the park is nearly finished.



PHOTO BY MICHELE BALL

"Standing Tall and Proud," the African American Heritage Mural Dedication, is located beside the Tazewell County Courthouse in Tazewell, Virginia.



EMILY BALL, BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

This Confederate Statue is located in front of the Tazewell County Courthouse in Tazewell, Virginia.

"All of the construction was completed. The lighting was put up. All we lack is some historical signage and maybe a picnic table out there," Barry said.

A different tack

A similar, anonymous Confederate soldier statue stands today in front of the Tazewell County Courthouse, just as it has since being dedicated on April Fool's Day, 1903.

In 2020 there was a concerted effort to have it relocated to a less public space.

The statue is dedicated to the Confederate soldiers from Tazewell County — but not the Confederacy, County Administrator Eric Young said.

The statue represents a soldier in uniform and his rifle — with a relief of the face of Gen. Robert E. Lee on the base, Young said.

"Lee was historically a very conciliatory figure," Young said. "And he became president of a college."

County officials opted to put the question on the ballot and let residents decide. Some 78% of voters overwhelmingly approved keeping the monument right where it is.

"What we decided to do, instead of erasing history, is to give a more complete picture of our county history by adding monuments," Young said.

"The referendum overwhelmingly said they wanted the statue," Young said. "And the Board of Supervisors wanted something to present what African Americans had contributed to the county."

So a citizens committee was formed to ask the public what they would like to see, Young said.

In response, the portraits of 16 notable Black people, born in Tazewell County and who made impacts on the lives of others, were selected to be featured in a wall-story mural, painted in 2022 by artist Ellen Elmes of Tazewell, with help from several others. One person depicted was a former slave who became a lawyer in nearby West Virginia.

The display is called "Standing Tall and Proud: African-American Heritage in Tazewell County" and the portraits appear on the brick building adjacent to the courthouse on Main Street — facing the courthouse and the statue.

"It's an impressive collection," Young said. "And we're really kind of proud of the people who had done these things, especially with the headwinds that they had faced at the

time."

Along the way, any Civil War controversy has faded in Tazewell, Young said.

"We haven't had any more complaints about the Confederate monument since they have been voiced to the board. The issue has quieted down," he said.

In Bristol

A well-traveled Confederate soldier statue currently stands inconspicuously among trees in a parking lot near Cumberland Square Park.

First erected in front of the city's original courthouse in 1920, the white Italian marble statue was relocated to the Bristol train station when the courthouse was razed in 1970.

There it overlooked a busy intersection, in the shadow of the landmark Bristol sign. For four years the statue stood beside Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, after the City Council renamed the former Randall Street Expressway in 2007.

In 2011, the Ann Carter Lee chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy completed a 21-year fund drive and paid to have the statue moved to its present spot. The inscription at the statue's base notes that it is dedicated to the "memory of the brave men and noble women of Tennessee and Virginia from 1861 to 1865."

A rededication ceremony was held in 2014.

At the time of the Civil War, the two Bristols were just starting to take shape. Both Bristol, Tennessee and Goodson, Virginia, were formed in the 1850s, built primarily around the railroad tracks. The Virginia community didn't formally become Bristol Virginia until 1890.

"I think Southwest Virginia and Northeast Tennessee were less onboard with the whole Confederate thing," Bristol Virginia

Mayor Neal Osborne said. "But those are things that happened 150, 170 years ago in history and monuments to the losing side in a rebellion — I don't know that they need a place of honor."

Names Remain

Across Southwest Virginia, names remain on landmarks serving as tributes to prominent Confederate leaders.

The Lee Highway, which takes its name from Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee, was established in the early 20th century and spans the U.S., from New York City to San Francisco. In Virginia, Lee Highway stretches from Bristol to Washington, D.C.

In Damascus and beyond, the Jeb Stuart Highway along U.S. 58 takes its name from James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart, a native of Patrick County, Virginia, and a colorful Confederate cavalry general.

Some schools in Southwest Virginia also bear names that pay homage to the Confederacy, including Bristol's Stonewall Jackson Elementary and Washington-Lee Elementary.

"A hundred years ago, Lee and Jackson were held up as good, solid citizens," said McKnight.

Both schools are scheduled to close next year with students being consolidated into other buildings.

"From the academia perspective, what we really do study in history is how history changes over time," McKnight said. "The faces of history do not change, but our interpretation of history changes."

Elsewhere, Gate City features a Confederate memorial; Marion boasts a Confederate monument; and Lebanon's landscape includes a Confederate monument from the early 1900s near the Russell County Courthouse.

Very few monuments were erected west of Abingdon, McKnight said.

"In deep Southwest Virginia, there wasn't a lot of conventional warfare," McKnight said. "So we didn't have a lot of battles and have a lot of these later celebratory generals coming through. So there weren't a lot of activities to remember."

News Editor David McGee contributed to this story. jtennis@bristolnews.com 276-791-0709 @BHC_Tennis dmcgee@bristolnews.com Twitter: @DMcGeeBHC

TO PLACE AN OBITUARY visit <https://ads.heraldcourier.com/bristol-portal/obits/index.html>

The Bristol Herald Courier publishes obituaries 7 days per week. Obituaries are available in print, E-Edition and online. On Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday we offer print + E-Edition and online obituaries. On Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, we offer E-Edition +online obituaries. Our online obituaries appear on Legacy.com and our local newspaper site. Our daily deadline is 11 a.m. EST, Monday edition deadlines on Saturday at 11 a.m. Our offices are closed on Sundays.

If you need to reach us by phone, please call 888-220-4265 or email obits@bristolnews.com