



Getting Into ‘Good Trouble’: An Interview with *History is Illuminating*

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INTERVIEW



ABSTRACT

SPECTRA editors Sarah Plummer and Shaun Respass interview a group of rogue historians called *History is Illuminating* about their work installing unofficial interpretive signs along Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia following public protests and discourse surrounding Confederate monuments in Summer 2020.

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In the Summer of 2020, nearly 100 Confederate monuments were taken down across the United States by citizens, local councils, or state governments in the civil unrest following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. One of the most prominent images associated with this public discourse was the spray-painted statue of Robert E. Lee on a horse that stood in the city that was once the capital of the Confederacy (see **Figure 1**).



Figure 1 A Robert E. Lee statue in Richmond, Virginia is spray-painted during protests following the murder of George Floyd. Photo by *History is Illuminating*.

To understand how local historians are intervening in this public history discourse surrounding Confederate monuments, SPECTRA submitted questions to *History Is Illuminating: a Collaborative Public History Project* in March 2021. As part of these questions, we talk to *History is Illuminating* about their process, collective memory, and the cultural battle surrounding Confederate monuments in Richmond, Virginia.

History Is Illuminating is an anonymous group of rogue historians in the Richmond, Virginia area who began developing and installing historical markers in June 2020 after Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney announced that most of the Confederate monuments in Richmond would be removed. As part of a collaborative public history project, *History Is Illuminating* created historical markers that look similar to official state historical markers (see **Figure 2**). These markers were installed along Monument Avenue in Richmond and capture important moments of Black History in the late 1800s when the Confederate monuments were constructed. After an act of vandalism in July 2020, the City of Richmond removed these signs. When attempting to reinstall the signs, members of the group were confronted by police. They continue to push the project with community support as “Reimagine Monument Ave.”

Richmond-based community arts group Studio Two Three collaborated with *History is Illuminating* to develop a digital zine that mapped out the group’s interpretive signs. Download the zine at <https://studiotwothree.org/new-blog/2020/7/13/history-is-illuminating>.



Figure 2 Faux historical markers are readied for installation. Photo by *History Is Illuminating*.

SPECTRA: Will you please briefly describe the origin of *History Is Illuminating* and its central goals/ambitions?

History Is Illuminating: *History Is Illuminating* was created by a few historians who realized that the City of Richmond was about to tear down Confederate monuments without having the hard and complex discussions around their reasons for removal. As historians, we have all seen the complex web of confusion that the “Lost Cause” narrative has spun over southern history. When people learn about Virginia’s history in school, we teach: life at Jamestown Colony, American Colonial History, Civil War battle history, and, if you are lucky, some 1950s Civil Rights history. We sculpt the story to exclude the period of Reconstruction, in which Black Virginians (often those who had formerly been enslaved) rose to greatness. By excluding this consequential period, racist lies that our textbooks told us up to the 1980s — such as enslaved people were “happy” that way — became more “understandable.” As a white person, it’s easier to lie to yourself and say: “Oh they are just still pulling themselves up by their bootstraps” when you don’t acknowledge the infrastructural systems that were created while these monuments were being erected. In many of our personal experiences, once you lay out the unflattering facts that many chose not to amplify as it didn’t fit their narrative, people’s opinions shift, and they grow to understand more from the other side. We felt that the removal of these monuments without having those hard discussions would only further divide our community. Since the City of Richmond had made it abundantly clear that they had no intention of making good on the recommendation of the 2018 Monument Ave Commission (that Mayor Levar Stoney convened) to add context to the Avenue, we took it as an opportunity to get into some “Good Trouble” (See [Figure 3](#)).



Figure 3 One rouge sign explains some monuments' contribution to the "Lost Cause" narrative. Photo by History is Illuminating.

SPECTRA: Why has the group chosen to remain anonymous, and can you describe any measures that you all must take to protect the group?

History Is Illuminating: One of the best things about history is it's a universally acknowledged reality we all have access to, and our names wouldn't have validated or invalidated our shared story. Our group wasn't in this for the acknowledgements and felt like our jobs were to present the narratives the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) didn't want you to know.

Also, everyone in this group has a job. One of the many reasons historic organizations have a hard time shifting toward fuller narratives is the backlash they will receive from their traditional donors. We hoped to shield our respective jobs from this backlash.

SPECTRA: What is the "Lost Cause" narrative and its connection to Virginia?

History Is Illuminating: *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* was originally published by Edward Pollard, a Richmond newspaper editor, in 1867. In the book, he pulls together the narrative that Confederates soldiers were weaving together to help them understand their great emotional loss after the Civil War. The formerly enslaved were rising to do great things across the South during Reconstruction; meanwhile, White people had lost hundreds of thousands of young men defending their right to own other humans. One thing became clear: a focus on battle history and the argument of "States Rights" would shift the cause of the war. In 1894, a group arose to "explain" and "educate" a seamless narrative to the people of the South: the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). The UDC was a women's social group with two focuses: monuments and textbooks. They erected over 830 monuments to the Confederacy and at least 3 to the Klu Klux Klan across the South. Funding for these monuments would become a family affair, and children were often enlisted to raise funds. These monuments were constructed during the height of Jim Crow and monuments would often be touted by segregationist politicians who rightfully saw them as reinforcing a Southern history of White superiority and abuse (See **Figure 3**). The UDC's other focus, textbooks, would

leave us all working with a hegemonized understanding of history that neglects the stories of Black Americans or frames them as thankful for the abuse they suffered at the hands of White people. In the State of Virginia, textbooks claimed, up until the 1980s, that enslaved people were happy that way. It's nearly impossible to understand the complexities of our prison industrial complex or the many other issues that plague our nation if you don't have a sound understanding of our shared history.

SPECTRA: What role do monuments play in creating and maintaining cultural hegemony?

History Is Illuminating: We dove a little into this already but honestly this one is more about modern lived experiences and less about historic academia. Monument Ave was created for White people. The contracts for each home stated you could not sell to a Black family. The monuments create a space that White people visit to remember a history that makes them feel good and proud just like the UDC intended. I very rarely see Black families touring Monument Ave. Many of my POC friends have avoided driving on the Avenue before the summer of 2020, saying they didn't feel comfortable in the space. In modern times, many White Richmonders have spent little to no time learning about the figures depicted but rather see them as reminders of "where to turn to get to the art museum"; still others pridefully call them "my monuments." When I tell people I am from Richmond, many in the North ask with confusion if Monument Ave. is real, like a mythical racist Disneyland.

SPECTRA: One of your markers explains how additional money was raised during the construction of the Lee Monument in Richmond for its size to be increased so that it stood one foot taller than the monument of Washington in Capital Square. How important is it for the public to know the context in which monuments like these were raised, and how should it shape our understanding of them?

History Is Illuminating: Monumental scale is significant because it is literally how we learn as Americans: the bigger the more important. However, this situation had a special significance. The sculpture of Washington was constructed at the end of Reconstruction. It represented the allegiance of the Virginia State Government to the Federal Government. At that time, there were federal forces in the state enforcing the rights of Black people. When this phase of history ended and Jim Crow began, federal forces were removed and the state government went against the guidelines laid out by the Federal Government and created policies that controlled the lives of Black people across the commonwealth. Black men had served in the Virginia General Assembly from across the state. Then in 1889, voting laws were established to keep Black folk from the polls. The first act of the newly all-white General Assembly was to erect the Lee Monument. The choice to make him larger was a statement against the Federal Government and their ability to control state politics and or human rights.

SPECTRA: In 2018, Virginia newspapers shone light on three textbooks used to teach history in Virginia schools between the 1950s and 1970s that spread misinformation and lies about slavery by embracing many of the "Lost Cause" narratives. According to *The Richmond Times*, these textbooks were used by more than a million students. To what extent does your group feel these textbooks may have framed public debates surrounding Confederate monuments, and can your project help remedy such deep-rooted, intergenerational misinformation?

History Is Illuminating: Great Question! When we have an educational system that leaves out major parts of history and heavily builds significance to minor kindnesses paid by White people to Black people, it sets our entire society up for failure. It impacts families when younger generations who are better educated by modern systems struggle to relate to relatives with perspectives they know to be a charade. In recent years, I have heard so many old White people complain about how much we discuss race. They never talked about it before and that was just fine for them as it didn't affect them. It's also hard to hear that your ancestors, who were always cast as heroes by history, were directly responsible for the racism and abuse we know is wrong. Having open discussions across races, genders, ages, and socio-economic classes is the best way to gain understanding and perspective. Our zines were meant as a series of facts that create a new foundation on which to have these conversations.

SPECTRA: Has *History Is Illuminating* faced any issues with defacement or removal of signs? And what is the group's plan for maintaining the installations over the long term?

History Is Illuminating: Three of our signs were removed or defaced by people upset by a different narrative. Most noticeable was on July 3rd, 2020: A man on the 6 o'clock news announced how excited he was to learn about Sarah Garland Jones (Richmond's first Virginia-born and raised Black female doctor) on Monument Ave. In the early morning of July 4th, someone removed her sign in an attempt to erase the history of a Black woman's significance to our city on Independence Day; they did not remove the other side of the sign discussing the Stewart Monument, suggesting it was only the presence of a Black woman on Monument Ave that they truly despised. Almost immediately after these were removed by private citizens, the police showed up with a bomb squad and nine different K-9 teams to remove the last 3 signs. This was on the cover of the Richmond Times Dispatch. The city's removal of the signs is yet another indication of their unwillingness to truly grapple with the situation we have put ourselves in. We raised funds for replacement signs; however, when we attempted to reinstall them, we were confronted by cops that shoved one of our volunteers; after that we decided to try other channels. Currently, the two main organizers have joined a private group of concerned neighbors and protestors who are pushing a project called Reimagine Monument Ave.

SPECTRA: The digital zine about *History Is Illuminating* and your historical signs concludes by asking visitors who never learned Black History in school to express their concern to the Virginia Department of Education. How important is it for the group to get the public involved in asking for a more inclusive education, and does the group have any idea of how many citizens have been contacting the state department?

History Is Illuminating: The State Board of Education is one of the most important things we constantly need to pay attention to. Ours was controlled by the UDC for decades. I've heard a rumor in Texas that one of the members of their Board of Education participated in the Jan. 6, 2020 insurrection at the US Capitol. These are the people who create our understanding of the world we live in and only very recently has one of their goals been: don't be racist. We need to continue to apply pressure. Personally, I grew up in Richmond and I'm 30: I had teachers call the Civil War the "War of Northern Aggression," and if you had said the cause of the Civil War was slavery, you would have been told you were wrong. We also learned almost nothing about Black History or Native American history outside of Pocahontas. If any student graduates from a Virginia State School without learning about Gabriel Prosser or John Mitchell Jr., then we have failed them and the only heroes they will have to look to are white men who enslaved people and only look like half of Richmond's population.

SPECTRA: Are there any particular criticisms of note regarding your projects? If so, how do these claims misunderstand or misrepresent your broader message?

History Is Illuminating: We have mostly been met with disbelief. We get people accusing us of lying or fabricating facts. There are two issues that we get the most accusations about. One sign outlines Matthew Fontaine Maury's racist beliefs, who is celebrated as the "Father of Modern Oceanography." Because he wasn't a general, people have assumed he wasn't as bad and often goes undiscussed. Plot twist: he attempted to reinvent slavery two different times, one of which was after the Civil War and even General Robert Lee told him to cool it. Another one of our signs runs into issues because no one seems to believe that Black people served in the Virginia General Assembly during Reconstruction. I actually had two retired Richmond Public Schools social studies teachers tell me they liked the whole tour but didn't understand why I made up that lie. Between the two of them, they had been teaching for 60 years — our average student ratio is 16-1 — which means they've instilled that understanding in 960 Virginians. There are many Black Virginians, some of which had been formerly enslaved, that served in the Virginia General Assembly during this era and the Library of Virginia has a complete list as well as images of some.

SPECTRA: How does *History Is Illuminating* respond to the public suspicion of academics and historians alike, and how would your organization respond to the idea that historians should not be activists?

History Is Illuminating: Historians have always been activists. The choice of what we discuss puts us on one side or the other. For far too long history has been used as a colonizing force that reconfirms submission when it is supposed to be a story of our shared experiences. Our choice is not whether to advocate but rather who or what we advocate for.

SPECTRA: Given these challenges, how do you envision *History Is Illuminating* adapting in the near future? How might you reach new audiences in creative ways?

History Is Illuminating: We are currently trying to work with larger groups to create a Monument Ave where we can all feel comfortable. We have also been working with local African American Cemeteries in Richmond. If you have never heard of Richmond's 2nd African Burial Ground, we recommend you look it up. At least 21,000 free and enslaved African Americans were buried there between 1816 and 1879. After the cemetery closed, the city erased its presence from maps so it could be built over ("Buildlands called Disappearing the Enslaved: The Destruction and Recovery of Richmond's Second African Burial Ground" by Ryan Smith in *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* is an amazing article about this). In 1883, the city built 5th Street through it and used bodies as in-fill. Over the decades, the city has continued to build over the 9-acre historic site. During the past year, Mayor Levar Stoney has added the historic site to the Larger Shockoe Bottom Plan (Shockoe Bottom is the neighborhood where most of Richmond's slave auctions took place and is also the location of Richmond's 1st African Burial Ground) while in the same year allowing a High-Speed Rail (District of Columbia to Richmond) to be constructed over the same sacred ground.

We encourage everyone to go out and get into some well thought out "Good Trouble." When you know something is wrong, assume you are the person who will fix it or find the people who can and facilitate them. As Shirley Chisholm said: "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair."

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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