

## An Open Letter to the JMU Community on Racial Equity from the Academic Unit Head's Office

June 22, 2020

To the JMU Community:

The nationwide protests in the wake of the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks remind us that the university never exists in isolation from broader political events. Black Lives Matter demonstrations and activism across the country have galvanized us to examine the university's ongoing commitment to diversity and inclusion and to express frustration that the university's racialized climate remains unchanged and that meaningful transformation on campus remains an elusive aspiration. Frustration has now coalesced into demands to remove the names Maury, Jackson, and Ashby from buildings located on JMU's historic Bluestone quad.

As historians, we recognize the way in which those names—venerating prominent members of the Confederacy which sought to establish a new nation dedicated to preserving the institution of racial slavery—promote a distorted and noxious version of the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction, a history propounded by those seeking to justify segregation, political disfranchisement, and a racial narrative of white supremacy. Such names and other Confederate statuary across the nation commemorate the Civil War as a Lost Cause rather than as a war of liberation and emancipation won through bitter sacrifice in the name of patriotism and in support of democratic ideals of equality.

At long last, monuments to the Lost Cause are losing their political legitimacy. World history offers multiple examples of moments when people tore down the symbols of the old regime, whether it was early Christians displacing the pagan temples of the Romans, Protestants removing the statues of saints in Catholic cathedrals, or crowds ransacking monasteries during the French Revolution. Name removal offers a crucial first step to building a new campus culture that, as the Political Science Department has insisted, "rejects these symbols of hate."

The Quad will be a better and more welcoming and humane place if we move expeditiously to relegate the names of Maury, Jackson, and Ashby to the past. But we pledge to confront the past rather than deny and run away from it. As historian Lynn Hunt has written, the issue of monuments remains an open and "inevitably political question." It eludes easy resolution. We all must take part in determining what part of the past to preserve in order to maintain continuity and to remember the paths we have trod. This political moment offers us a unique opportunity to determine how to reclaim the meaning of those buildings and to consider how to rededicate and redefine those spaces to reflect the values we seek to uphold. Toward that end, History Department offered to establish office space on the second floor of Wilson Hall into a dedicated home for African, African American, and Diaspora Studies (AAAD). Although AAAD announced Moody Hall as their new future home, the offer to use space in Wilson Hall for AAAD remains an open invitation. In addition, we would like to offer to establish the student study room off the 2nd floor balcony for the use of the ALANA students and programs.

In the spirit of historian Kenneth Burke who describes the study of history as a discussion without end, we invite members of the JMU Community to contribute to this vital dialogue. The History Department stands ready to work with, promote, and facilitate an open, fair, and inclusive political process, rather than petition for a top-down decision, to determine how we tell our past and commemorate our landscape in order to better chart our future.

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