

VMI Commemorations and Memorials Naming and Review Committee Completes Its Work

After 19 months of intense study by its Commemorations and Memorials Naming and Review Committee, the VMI Board of Visitors voted April 30, 2022, to retain all the remaining statues and building names. Additionally, the vast majority of the other commemorative items, artwork, and memorials that had been the subject of the committee's scrutiny because of the item's association, however indirectly, with the Civil War, slavery, and the Confederacy will remain.

Committee chair Richard Hines '66 characterized the efforts of the committee as complicated, yet thorough. "Anyone looking at the work we did will see that, other than the imagery venerating Stonewall Jackson as a Confederate, or the Confederacy or slavery generally, the complicated history of VMI is not being erased from VMI's post," he said. "Indeed, this history is being retained and explained so that without trespassing on the sensibilities of the culturally and socially diverse society that is our present—and that is our future—an inviting and inspirational landscape will be presented to VMI cadets and their families, as well as to faculty, staff, friends, and all who come to visit Lexington and VMI."

"This was a very challenging project but the committee was meticulous in its analytical approach to their work," said Tom Watjen '76, president of the VMI Board of Visitors. "They began with a complete inventory of all items on post, developed a clear set of criteria for evaluating these items which informed the committee's recommendations without exception. I am pleased with the committee's work and thank each member for the time spent on this important issue."

Formed to ensure that VMI's landscape would be welcoming and inclusive for all, irrespective of their familiarity with its origins and history, the committee, through the work of VMI's Museum System's executive director, Col. Keith Gibson, collected an inventory of 19th and 20th century iconography associated with the confederacy located on its campus. The inventory was approved by the Board of Visitors in January 2021. At the same time, the Board approved a criteria document that guided the committee's work in reviewing and assessing the items in the inventory.

These criteria, based in large measure on a 2018 cultural heritage guidance document issued by an agency of the federal government, recognized the balance that must be drawn between VMI's obligation of stewardship and preservation of its memorials and tributes on the one hand, and a recognition of the ever-changing cultural responses and emotions over memorials associated with a difficult chapter in our nation's history on the other.

The diverse, 12-person committee was comprised of four board members, VMI faculty, staff, alumni, and the cadet regimental captain for public relations, as well as a Civil War scholar from the University of Virginia. The committee looked at the purpose of the veneration of each item in the inventory, and, if the purpose was to venerate the Confederacy or slavery, the item was removed. However, if the purpose of the tribute was the individual's contribution to VMI and if

that contribution outweighed other compelling historical considerations, the item was retained. Among the items the board voted to retain in their present location—with the installation of new and updated contextualizing information—were the Clinedinst mural depicting the cadet charge at New Market located in the renamed Memorial Hall and the statue of VMI's first superintendent, Maj. Gen. Francis Smith, that stands in front of the administration building that will continue to bear his name.