

Thomas Jefferson Statue Evicted From City Hall Will Go to a Museum

Heeding requests to move the statue because of Jefferson's legacy as an enslaver, the city approved a plan to relocate it to the New-York Historical Society.



The Jefferson statue first appeared at City Hall in the 1830s, and was moved to the Council chamber eight decades later.

By Jeffery C. Mays and Zachary Small

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A 19th-century statue of Thomas Jefferson, which had spent more than 100 years perched above the New York City Council chamber, was marked for removal last month by city officials.

The decision, which came after a unanimous vote, was decades in the making: Many Council members, especially from the Council's Black, Latino and Asian Caucus, had pushed for the statue's eviction; opponents argued that removing it would be an overreaction to Jefferson's complex history as the primary author of the Declaration of Independence, but also as a man who enslaved more than 600 people and fathered several children with one of them, Sally Hemings.

Left unresolved was when the 7-foot statue would be moved, and where it would go.

On Monday, those answers became clear. The statue will be given to the New-York Historical Society, and will be placed in its lobby gallery for six months before being relocated to the museum's reading room for the duration of the 10-year loan agreement. Both locations are accessible to the public in areas not requiring a ticket.

Louise Mirrer, the historical society's president and chief executive, said the statue would be displayed starting in April and would coincide with an exhibition looking at the "principal contradiction of our founding ideals."

"From the start, we have seen the opportunity to display the statue as consistent with the ways in which we look at history at our institution," Ms. Mirrer said in an interview. "Jefferson just has to be one of those figures that really draws attention to the distance between our founding ideals and the reality of our nation."

The decision was finalized on Monday by the Public Design Commission, which oversees art at city-owned property.

The commission had planned to authorize moving the statue to the historical society last month, but delayed amid concerns that it would not be freely accessible if it were placed there. Members of the public also raised strong opposition to the proposal during a virtual public hearing.

The sculpture was created by the celebrated French artist Pierre-Jean David d'Angers. It is a plaster model of the bronze statue of Jefferson that is on display in the United States Capitol Rotunda in Washington. The statue was commissioned in 1833 by Uriah P. Levy, the first Jewish commodore in the United States Navy, to commemorate Jefferson's advocacy of religious freedom in the armed forces.

The painted plaster version was later donated to New Yorkers and arrived at City Hall around 1834. Levy charged admission to view the sculpture and donated the money to the poor. The historical society already has a sword that belonged to Levy in its collection.

Michele H. Bogart, a professor emeritus of art history and visual culture at Stony Brook University in New York, said the statue's removal only "deflects attention" from the "bad men" who are sometimes memorialized in public art. Ms. Bogart was one of 17 historians who signed a letter last month that suggested relocating the statue to the Governor's Room in City Hall, a reception room where it was housed for most of the 19th century.

"I have a philosophical problem with removing it from City Hall," said Ms. Bogart, who served on the design commission under Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani. "If you can remove the Thomas Jefferson statue, then you can remove works from other city buildings."

The Governor's Room option was rejected for several reasons, according to Keri Butler, executive director of the design commission: The city lacked the ability to properly contextualize the statue in that space; City Hall is not typically open to the public on the weekends or evenings; and the Governor's Room is only open to the public during scheduled tours.

The controversy highlighted the contentious debate over how much to weigh America's history of racialized oppression in re-evaluating artwork and public monuments.

"It should be destroyed," said Assemblyman Charles Barron, a former councilman who first tried to get the statue removed from City Hall in 2001. "A statue should be for those who we honor for their exemplary service and duty to all of this country, not just the white race."

Indeed, Jefferson and his legacy as a slave holder are facing a national reckoning. Several other Jefferson statues have been removed or destroyed in the last year, including ones in Oregon and Georgia.

Todd Fine, a local preservation activist, described the commission's decision as "hypocritical," after officials expressed reservations about placing the public artwork inside a private museum.

"I have a feeling this will be the future of a lot of public artworks and monuments," Mr. Fine said. "They will just be given away to private entities."

New York City has often struggled to deal with public monuments devoted to divisive historical figures. Mayor Bill de Blasio pledged to remove "symbols of hate" on city property after a 2017 protest by white nationalists in Charlottesville, Va., over plans to remove a Robert E. Lee statue turned into a deadly riot.

Facing intense criticism over his comments, Mr. de Blasio retreated and appointed a commission to decide how to address statues such as one of Christopher Columbus at Columbus Circle; one of Theodore Roosevelt at the entrance of the American Museum of Natural History; and one of Dr. J. Marion Sims, who is considered a founder of modern gynecology but who operated on enslaved Black women without their consent, at Central Park at Fifth Avenue and 103rd Street.

Only the statue of Sims has been removed. Vinnie Bagwell, a Black sculptor, was chosen to create a new statue called "Victory Beyond Sims," a bronze angel holding a flame. The Public Design Commission has approved a long-term loan of the Roosevelt statue to an undetermined cultural institution, but it remains in place.

For Council members who say working under the gaze of Jefferson is uncomfortable and even emotionally painful, the statue's removal can't come soon enough.

The Black, Latino and Asian Caucus has joined with the Progressive Caucus to demand that the statue be removed before the Council holds its next meeting in the chamber on Nov. 23.

"If they want to treat this relic as some type of work of art, so be it," said I. Daneek Miller, a councilman from Queens and co-chair of the Black, Latino and Asian Caucus. "The removal needs to be expedited."