

Confederate statue to be removed from Virginia's Monument Avenue

The decision to remove the memorial is a striking departure from recent years and was hailed by black leaders and activists



Lt. Governor Justin Fairfax speaks to demonstrators in front of the statue of Confederate General Robert E Lee on 4 June.

Guardian staff and agencies

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A towering statue of Confederate General Robert E Lee will be removed as soon as possible from downtown Richmond, Virginia, Governor Ralph Northam said Thursday, pledging the state will no longer preach a “false version of history”.

The announcement has been widely praised by black leaders and activists, and their allies, as a key marker – but not the finish line – on the path to equality.

Wes Bellamy, a former Charlottesville city councilman, said the announcement that one of the nation’s most iconic tributes to the Confederacy would be taken down felt like divine intervention. “We’ve slayed Goliath,” Bellamy said.

“I always hoped this day would come but never fully believed it would,” said Senator Jennifer McClellan. She said when the statue is finally gone it will feel “like an incredible burden has been lifted off my shoulders and finally I can breathe and heal”.

The bronze equestrian statue, which sits on an enormous pedestal on state property, will be moved to storage while Northam’s administration works with the community to determine its future, the governor said at a news conference where the announcement was met with extended applause.

“You see, in Virginia, we no longer preach a false version of history. One that pretends the civil war was about state rights and not the evils of slavery. No one believes that any longer,” Northam said.

The statues on Monument Avenue are among the most prominent collection of tributes to the Confederacy in the nation. Lee’s 21-foot (6-meter) sculpture rises atop a pedestal nearly twice that tall on a grassy circle 200 feet (about 61 meters) in diameter.

“We put things on pedestals when we want people to look up,” Northam said. “Think about the message that this sends to people coming from around the world to visit the capital city of one of the largest states in our country. Or to young children.”

The move comes after days of angry protests in Richmond and across the country over the death of George Floyd, a black man who died after a white police officer pressed a knee into his neck while he pleaded that he could not breathe.

The decision also came a day after Richmond’s mayor, Levar Stoney, announced he will seek to remove the four other Confederate statues along Monument Avenue, a prestigious residential street and National Historic Landmark district in the former capital of the Confederacy.

Together, they mark a striking departure from recent years when even after a violent rally of white supremacists descended on Charlottesville in 2017 and other Confederate monuments started falling across the country, Virginia did not make the same changes.

In part, local governments were hamstrung by a state law that protects memorials to war veterans. That law was amended earlier this year by the new Democratic majority at the statehouse and signed by Northam. When the changes go into effect 1 July, localities will be able to decide the monuments’ fate.

As for the Lee statue, Northam and his predecessor, fellow Democrat Terry McAuliffe, have not previously pressed the issue.

Elsewhere on the broad avenue lined with mansions and tony apartments are statues to Confederate president Jefferson Davis, Gens J E B Stuart and Thomas Stonewall Jackson and Confederate naval officer Matthew Maury.

A statue of black tennis hero Arthur Ashe, a Richmond native, was erected on Monument Avenue in 1996.

The decision to remove the Lee monument has drawn condemnation from Confederate heritage groups and the leader of a Richmond group dedicated to preserving Monument Avenue. But it has been hailed by black lawmakers and activists, many of whom have long called for its removal.

Robert Johns, the brother of the late civil rights icon Barbara Johns, who as a teenager helped lead the push against public school segregation, said his family was pleased to learn of the statue's removal, calling it a symbol of hate, bigotry and division.

"We are now walking into a new era of acceptance, respect and inclusion," he said.

A descendant of Lee's brother, the Rev Robert W Lee IV, also endorsed the monument's removal, saying at the news conference that his line of the Lee family wholeheartedly commends the governor's decision.

"Friends, the world may be burning and the world is about to turn because we are going to let justice roll down, and this is the start of something incredible," he said.

Leaders of the House and Senate GOP caucuses criticized Northam, whose decision on the statue marks his most visible action so far to make good on his pledge to devote his term to promoting racial equity after a scandal over a racist photo that appeared on his medical school yearbook page nearly forced him from office last year.

"The governor's decision to remove the Lee statue from Monument Avenue is not in the best interests of Virginia. Attempts to eradicate instead of contextualizing history invariably fail," said Senate Republican leaders in a statement.

For years, when Republicans controlled the general assembly, they blocked efforts to change the law protecting war memorials.

A spokeswoman for the state's Department of General Services, which Northam said would handle the removal, said Thursday that planning is underway to ensure it is completed safely and effectively.