

Exhibition Reviews

Virginia Museum of History & Culture. Jamie O. Bosket, President & CEO; Adam E. Scher, Vice President for Collections & Exhibitions. May 14, 2022–Ongoing. <https://virginiahistory.org>.

The Virginia Museum of History & Culture (VMHC) sits on the corner of the former campus of the Robert E. Lee Camp Soldiers' Home in Richmond. Workers provided care for Confederate veterans' bodies here in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries just as others were hard at work in this same city caring for the future of the Confederate past. At the height of the expression of Lost Cause ideology, the Confederate Memorial Association built a history museum on this campus in the 1910s. That building, known as the Battle Abbey, housed paintings and artifacts telling the story of the US Civil War from a distinctly Confederate perspective. As recently as 2016, when I last visited, you could still walk through the former entrance of the Battle Abbey, look up, and see Confederate symbology etched into the ceilings including the stars and bars of the battle flag and icons of former Confederate states. Look up in the same room today and you will find that it has been all painted over.

The VMHC, founded in 1831, and occupying the Battle Abbey building since 1946, commenced a massive "reimagining," as the museum put it, of their building and exhibitions in 2020. This was at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic but also, more significantly, after a summer of uprisings following the police murder of George Floyd—comprising the largest civil disturbances in the US since the 1960s. During that summer, Richmond activists took public history into their own hands, reimagining monuments and symbols all across their city: tearing down statues, tagging pedestals with graffiti, even firebombing the United Daughters of the Confederacy headquarters next door to the VMHC. Local and state government responded by swiftly ordering the removal of some of the city's most iconic Confederate statuary. The VMHC's plans were forged in the zeitgeist of this moment.

In May 2022, the VMHC reopened to the public. One aspect of the museum's reimagining is to reorient visitors' initial encounter with the museum to the rear of the building, encouraging use of a newly redesigned main entrance that escorts visitors into Commonwealth Hall, a new grand foyer. You can still enter from the other side of the building—through the Battle Abbey doors—but that approach is not encouraged. As you enter through the new entrance, you pass a new museum café and bookstore. Up the steps at the back of the foyer, visitors will encounter a new immersive theater playing a fifteen-minute orientation film on a loop. This



The Virginia Museum of History & Culture as seen from Arthur Ashe Boulevard.
(Photograph by author)

film does what any state history museum is always striving for, which is to cover the geographic and chronological breadth of an entire state in a very short amount of time. The film focuses on Virginia as a crossroads of peoples, empires, and enterprises, and leaves visitors with the lingering thought that Virginia's history remains unfolding and unfinished. I left the theater with the thought that Virginia was and remains a distinctly colonial project, and that we are still grappling with what to do about that.

The museum's newest permanent exhibition is *Our Commonwealth*. This exhibit, which breaks down Virginia's geographic diversity into five regions, each explored thematically, is a clear complement to the older *Story of Virginia* exhibition still on display in the opposite wing of the museum. The *Story of Virginia* covers the commonwealth's history from thousands of years ago to the present in a strictly chronological flow, without much attention to regional differentiation. *Our Commonwealth* does the exact opposite: eschewing chronology for a regional focus. It is an attractively designed exhibition. There is no clear flow of materials, thus helping resist any explicit or implicit hierarchy of Virginia's regions. Perhaps the most impressive collections and interpretations within each region are drawn

from the present: a Black Lives Matter protest sign; a coloring book inspired by Black activists' reimagining of the former Robert E. Lee monument on Monument Avenue; a rainbow-colored pussy hat from the women's march; profiles of activists and workers with a particular focus on the lives of people of color. *Our Commonwealth* represents a noteworthy effort to refocus the museum's collecting and



Statue of Robert E. Lee in the exhibition “The Lost Cause: Myths, Monuments, & Murals,” Virginia Museum of History & Culture. (Photograph by author)

interpretive practices away from the institution's historic concentration on the lives and legacies of elite white men.

But as a large institution with its own legacy rooted in slavery and the Jim Crow era, the VMHC plods forward while carrying the great weight of its past. This is best represented in the former Battle Abbey, which today comprises just one wing of the modern museum, gobbled up by a near-century of architectural expansions. The history of the Battle Abbey is told in just one room with a new title, *The Lost Cause: Myths, Monuments, & Murals*. Here, Charles Hoffbauer's famous 1921 history paintings of the Civil War, an illustrative glorification of the Lost Cause, remain splashed across four walls. New interpretive paneling has been installed on all sides in front of the murals. In the center of the room there is a new addition: the Robert E. Lee statue from Statuary Hall in the US Capitol that the commonwealth of Virginia removed in 2020. (Virginia is replacing the Lee statue with one of Civil Rights activist Barbara Johns.) It is interesting to see an intact, untouched Robert E. Lee standing sentinel in this room, as all of his Confederate brethren—including a much-mightier version of himself—have since been removed from their pedestals on the surrounding streets. The VMHC has buttressed this Lee with important interpretive texts, but he still stands noticeably not broken, not tagged with graffiti, quite unassailable. As I left the museum through the Battle Abbey doors, I noticed what appeared to be private security guards standing outside of the United Daughters of the Confederacy headquarters next door. These buildings are like fortresses protecting our past—protecting it from us.

The VMHC has taken great strides in their reopening to become a museum that demonstrates respect and care for the diversity of all Virginians and our complicated histories. They have grappled with the legacies of their own institution, too, and of their building, in work that is ongoing. The remodeled exhibition and gathering spaces should now be used for greater community collaboration and participation, particularly with activist groups and organizations invested in the reimagining of these stories. The VMHC is attempting to tell all of Virginia's stories all at once, but perhaps their most pressing work remains in the struggle against institutional legacies of racism and white supremacy. That, too, is the story of Virginia.

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