

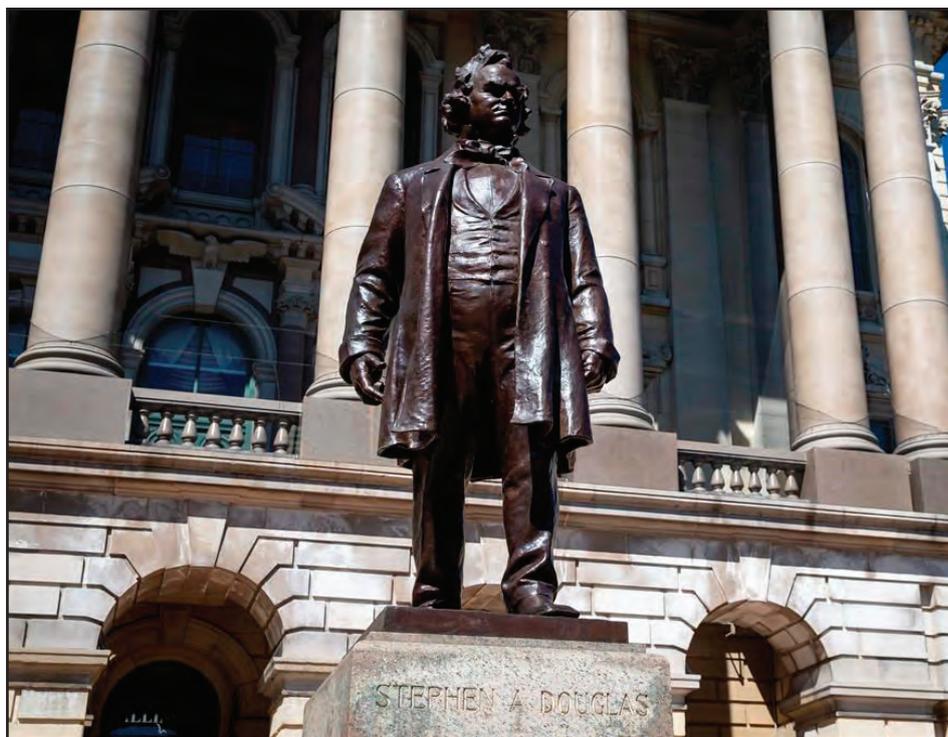
Ulysses Grant and Stephen Douglas: Slavery and Statues

By Dennis A. Rendleman

Recently, the Office of the Architect of the Capitol removed the statue of Stephen A. Douglas from the capitol grounds. In June, in San Francisco, protesters pulled down a statue of Ulysses S. Grant. Both incidents resulted from allegations of support for slavery.

There seems to be a drift away from the true object of removal of incendiary monuments to racism and the Confederacy's Lost Cause myth. The vast majority of Confederacy monuments were constructed after Reconstruction ended. Legalized discrimination (a/k/a Jim Crow laws) was instituted. It thrived through the 1920-30's or during the 1950's as protests to the civil rights movement successes in the courts. Most of the military installations named after Confederate figures are in the South and were named after local Confederates as part of the Lost Cause mythology that the Civil War was an heroic fight for state's rights and the Southern way of life—not slavery and bigotry. The record shows that, for the most part, the base namesakes were not even successful military leaders. Removal and renaming are not only justified socially, but also historically. If statues of traitors are needed one could start with Benedict Arnold, who was a successful American military leader before defecting to the British.

But statues of Douglas and Grant are much more difficult. Douglas is represented with a statute on the second floor of the building (separate from the one removed from the grounds) and portraits in the Illinois Capitol building. U.S. Grant is present in a painting on the first floor and a statute on the third floor. Both Douglas and Grant were political leaders who played significant roles in the nation's history. Both had connections to Abraham Lincoln and to slavery. But their stories are not as



The Stephen A. Douglas statue at the Illinois State Capitol, before it was removed and placed in storage.

simple as those Confederate/Lost Cause characters.

Perhaps we should consider the words of the late University of Illinois Professor and Civil War scholar (and my civil war history professor) Robert W. Johannsen. In his book *The Frontier, the Union, and Stephen A. Douglas*, he urges modern citizens to understand the “spirit of the age” in considering those who lived and acted during a period.

The concept seems similar to the conservative legal doctrine of “originalism” which argues that the U.S. Constitution should be strictly interpreted as the writers understood the meaning of words at the time they were originally used. More realistically, the “originalism” construct is simply an effort to find some structural framework upon which to hang preferred results. In fact, all constitutional interpretation is of a “living” constitution what evolves

with society. In that same living interpretation context, society now recognizes the racist intent of confederate statutes and military bases to further the Lost Cause myth.

This digression brings us back to Douglas. He has gotten the most attention recently because he has been accused, in modern terms, of being a “white supremacist” or “racist”. An article in the September/October 2020 issue of the Illinois State Historical Society magazine *Illinois Heritage* by Douglas scholar Reg Ankrom illustrates the confusion. Douglas never owned slaves, but he did manage and therefore profited from his wife's inherited Mississippi plantation with enslaved workers. Subsequently, as guardian for his sons, Douglas sold the plantation and the enslaved workers.

But as Ankrom notes, in the “spirit of the age” Douglas did not argue for or against slavery because from his perspective the issue was governed by slavery having been written into the

U.S. Constitution. Instead, Douglas believed in popular sovereignty—let the voters decide between being a free state or a slave state. During the Lincoln-Douglas debates, both men agreed that, regardless of whatever differences existed between whites and blacks, “did not preclude the black from the rights and privileges to which he was entitled under the constitution.” Lincoln’s evolution on racial equality is well known. (See, AP reporter John O’Connor, <https://www.theguardnernews.com/ZZ/news/20200920/douglas-statue-comes-down-but-lincoln-had-racist-views-too>)

Which brings us to Ulysses S. Grant—the son of an abolitionist and son-in-law of a slave owner. Though an Illinois native or elected officeholder, he is an Illinois “favorite son.” It was in Galena, Illinois, where Grant was working in his father’s tannery, that he began his Civil War service by drilling and providing guidance to the Jo Daviess (County) Guards. In the Capitol, there is the painting on the First Floor, North Corridor, entitled “Ulysses S. Grant taking command at Cairo in 1861” and on the Third Floor, a sculpture of “Ulysses S. Grant, former U.S. President, Civil War General.”

However, it is documented that Grant did own a slave, William Jones. According to Ron Chernow biography *Grant*, Jones was most likely a gift from his father-in-law. In March 1859, Grant “manumit[ed], emancipate[d], and set free” Jones, even though Grant’s financial condition was such that selling Jones would have provided significant benefit reducing Grant’s poverty. In the time he struggled as a farmer, Grant hired free Black workers for decent wages. Yet, Julia Dent Grant continued to own enslaved people given to her by her father. Julia recorded that she kept them “up to the time of President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.”

Most important, throughout the war, Grant became more committed to abolition. From the end of the war through the end of his presidency, Grant was committed to Reconstruction and protection of formerly



The General Ulysses S. Grant statue in Lincoln Park, Chicago.

photos by Dennis Rendleman

enslaved persons. But the contested election between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel J. Tilden resulted in the Compromise of 1877—an unwritten deal that gave Hayes the presidency in exchange for ending Reconstruction in the former Confederate states. The resulting terror that raged by whites against Blacks, prompted Grant to consider running for a third term in 1880.

We must carefully consider Johannsen’s “spirit of the age” admonishment when we consider who is to be honored at the Illinois State Capitol. Neither Douglas nor Grant—any more than Lincoln—are the equivalent of the various memorials to the Confederacy.

Perhaps of more concern consistent with the removal of statues and renaming of military bases may be the fact that Illinois’ Calhoun County (where I spent the first three years of my life) was named for John C. Calhoun of South Carolina—a vigorous unapologetic advocate for state slavery. Sen. Calhoun argued that Congress had no authority to abolish slavery anywhere, including the District of Columbia; and that “[t]he

relation now existing in the slave-holding States between the two [races] is, instead of an evil, a good—a positive good.” In June 2020, the city of Charleston, S.C., removed the statue of Calhoun. The bronze statue stood atop a 100-foot column in the main downtown Charleston park.

Rich Miller in Capitol Fax highlighted the existence of Calhoun County’s direct connection with John C. Calhoun in June 2015. <https://capitolfax.com/2015/06/209/on-calhoun-county/> There, he noted that across the Mississippi River in Missouri there existed a Lincoln County. While it might be a stretch to rename Calhoun County after President Obama—a fitting response to Calhoun—the prospect of finally establishing a Lincoln County in Illinois seems reasonable. Whether renamed Lincoln or Obama County, the Calhoun Peaches would be just as sweet. 

Dennis A. Rendleman is a Springfield lawyer and historian. For the past five years he has portrayed U.S. Grant in the play “Message at Midnight” at the Abraham Lincoln National Home and the U.S. Grant National Historic Sites.