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Author: Sue Donovan

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American Institute for Conservation
727 15th Street NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
info@culturalheritage.org www.culturalheritage.org

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Conservator and Stakeholder: Experiences with the Salvage of a Confederate Time Capsule

This article issues from a presentation given from Charlottesville, Virginia, on the ancestral land and waters of the Monacan Nation. The author extends her respect and gratitude to the Monacan Nation elders and hopes the reader will have a chance to look at their website (<https://www.monacannation.com>) to understand more about their culture and community. In addition, the author works on the Grounds of the University of Virginia (UVA) which was built upon and thrived off of the labor of enslaved workers. Please consult <https://slavery.virginia.edu/> to read more about the history of slavery and enslaved workers at UVA. Black and indigenous lives and the lives of people of color matter, and it is the author's hope that this presentation contributes to that.

INTRODUCTION

On September 12, 2020, the Confederate statue in front of the Albemarle County Courthouse was removed. Albemarle County is located in Central Virginia, east of the Blue Ridge Mountains, where the city of Charlottesville and the University of Virginia (UVA) are located. Charlottesville was the site of the deadly Unite the Right rallies in 2017 when white supremacists rallied against the city's proposal to remove statues of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson from public parks. They marched with lit tiki torches through the UVA UNESCO heritage site, assaulted students and counter protesters, and ultimately murdered an activist named Heather Heyer. Three years later, the nation was reeling from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the horrifying murder of George Floyd in May 2020 that incited protests against racial violence worldwide. It was in this climate and with this history that the Albemarle County statue was removed.

Albemarle County's Confederate statue was located in front of the county courthouse, which is located on county land in downtown Charlottesville. The statue was dedicated in 1909 as the "Johnny Rebel" or *At Ready* statue, paid for

by the county with some contributions from the United Daughters of the Confederacy and citizens of the county. The county Board of Supervisors voted in August 2020 to remove the statue, becoming the first locality in the area to remove its Confederate statue. A time capsule was buried underneath the bottom pedestal of the statue, and the director of Equity and Inclusion for the county first reached out to UVA Library to understand what condition the time capsule could be in and then later asked if the library would be interested in acquiring the time capsule.

TIME CAPSULES: MATERIALS AND IMPACT

Historically, time capsules often have an outer structure made of a sturdy material (e.g., metal or stone) that is buried underground, such as that underneath the Robert E. Lee monument in Raleigh, North Carolina, which was unearthed in July 2020. They can also be enclosed in a component of a building or monument, such as the time capsule within a granite sphere on the Salt Lake City Mormon Temple or within a marble cornerstone under Charleston's John C. Calhoun monument. Time capsules commemorate a specific event, such as the erection of a building or monument, or the turn of the century, or of a specific person. Their contents are selected by specific communities or organizations responsible for the special event, monument, or building.

Time capsules can often be found underneath Confederate monuments erected in the 1910s and 1920s as part of the southern "Lost Cause" campaign because the burial of a time capsule was used as a fundraising event for the statue itself (note 1). The burial of the *At Ready* time capsule was well attended and well documented, complete with an article in the local paper about the contents that were put inside it. This curated collection of documents and artifacts celebrated veterans of the Confederate cause and the Confederacy. Those who originally buried it under tons of concrete never intended for it to see the light of day again: they placed the last pedestal over the hole with the time capsule, where they said it would stay until "time shall be no more" (Revelation 10:6, as quoted in *The*

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Daily Progress, March 15, 1909) (note 2). In this way, the people who erected the statue entombed and sought to protect their view of history to the detriment of voices of color in Albemarle County and the surrounding area.

Time capsules can be quite problematic, especially ones that are buried underneath monuments. The weight of monuments can crush time capsules, allowing water to infiltrate and devastate the contents. Images published online after opening Raleigh's time capsule showed a wooden box that had been salvaged with only a mass of sludge that had once been paper visible in the background. Only small pieces of text could be identified amidst the debris. Unfortunately, this image was foreshadowing for the condition of the *At Ready* time capsule. At the same time, giving the author hope, a time capsule had been unearthed from Arlington National Cemetery in May 2020 with its contents intact, although the Arlington time capsule with its double-walled copper enclosure did not have much in common with the *At Ready* time capsule.

In a list printed in the local newspaper *The Daily Progress* in 1909, the *At Ready* time capsule contents were primarily paper-based documents such as membership rosters and histories of UVA, Charlottesville, and the area. One silk ribbon and one zinc commemorative badge were listed as well. With the knowledge that any water infiltration could lead to mold growth and result in severe damage to the paper within, it was important to Albemarle County to have someone to whom they could bring the time capsule after removal to assess damage and stabilize if necessary. Removing the time capsule safely and having a place for it to be assessed were important steps to facilitate the removal of the *At Ready*/"Johnny Reb" statue.

Work at the UVA Library conservation lab has included stabilizing items from the Unite the Right rallies in 2017 and creating a housing for a burned cross from the 1960s, so dealing with materials with harmful histories was lamentably familiar. Yet accepting to assess and stabilize the *At Ready* time capsule represented the opportunity to act as a stakeholder in the community while contributing expertise as a conservator. Facilitating the removal of a racist statue would help reduce the everyday trauma that Black citizens feel in Charlottesville. And in so doing, the evidence of that harmful history would be preserved, safeguarding it so that it would not be repeated or denied.

SALVAGE OF THE *AT READY* TIME CAPSULE

On the day of the statue's removal, thousands of pounds of granite stacked in layers were lifted away carefully until only the cement of the foundation remained. As indicated in the 1909 *Daily Progress* article, the time capsule was indeed located underneath the bottom pedestal, but it was in a condition no one could have anticipated. A hole roughly 12 in. square had been carved out or molded in the cement to fit the

dimensions of the time capsule, and it was completely inundated with water. Adding to the horror, when the last pedestal was removed, large bugs that looked like cockroaches scurried out from the hole. Members of the Albemarle County crew bailed water out of the hole with a disposable coffee cup, all they had on hand, to try to locate the time capsule.

It seemed that the concrete had expanded over time, pressing in on the sides of the thin copper box, causing the lead solder to fail and the box lid to pop off. This meant that the time capsule had most likely been soaking in groundwater since slightly after the box was interred in 1909. As the water level rose, the contents of the time capsule became bathed in what the Virginia State Archaeological Conservator described as an "acidic soup." Because of the type of cement and the amount of expansion, it required more than an hour of careful jackhammering to free the time capsule from the hole.

When the box had been removed and taken to the UVA Library conservation lab, it was clear that the contents had been submerged in water for a long time. The acidic water had stripped the outer layers of metal, leaving the sides of the box orange and shiny, whereas areas above the water line were a dull greenish-brown (fig. 1). Similarly, when the commemorative badges were excavated, the metal was shiny and bright, not at all what would be expected from metal obtained from an archaeological context. Upon exposure to air for the first time in more than a century, however, the brilliance of the metal quickly tarnished (fig. 2).

The textiles within the time capsule were also intact, although the small flag (unlisted in the contents) that was at the bottom of the box was heavily stained, and only the faintest colors were discernible. This and a silk ribbon were in relatively stable condition, with the copper of the box and the lack of oxygen in the time capsule perhaps having contributed to their preservation.

In contrast to the metal objects and the textiles, the paper-based items did not fare as well. The 20th-century wood pulp paper simply did not have the structural integrity to withstand more than a century of immersion in dirty, acidic water. There was extensive damage to the edges of the stacks of paper, and once-distinct books or pamphlets were practically fused together (fig. 3). Everything felt soft to the touch—like the bottom of a lake. Microspatulas and dental tools had to be inserted into a pile of degraded paper without the tactile information generally available when performing a wet treatment on paper. Strips of nonwoven polyester and the capillary action of the wet pages could be used, however, to peel sections apart and reveal the less-damaged text in the middle of the piles. This allowed the curator present to identify the work based on the list of contents from the local newspaper (fig. 4).

In addition to the need to separate pages, there was the pressure of triaging the more at-risk objects within the time



Fig. 1. The *At Ready* time capsule upon its arrival at the conservation lab. Courtesy of Nicole Royal.

capsule. After being in a wet, acidic, and anoxic microclimate for 111 years, a patina formed on the metal of the artifacts in a relatively short amount of time. And the image of the University chapel in the postcard photograph turned cloudy and dull upon drying. This meant that it was important to focus on what needed to be pulled apart while still wet and pliable, in addition to trying to match pages to a contents list (fig. 5).

Soon after salvage began, it was clear that working on this Confederate time capsule was a lot like salvaging items from a disaster. It smelled horrendous, go-to techniques in a normal lab setting were not feasible, expertise of conservation staff was stretched thin, everyone wanted to know what was inside, and there was the strain of the content and context of the material being salvaged. Other conservators working on time capsules from Confederate monuments have spoken of having to work on an extremely short timeline because of the sensitivity around removing monuments. Although there was no secrecy around the removal of the *At Ready* statue, UVA Library's involvement was announced during the livestream of the removal, and the history of the riots in Charlottesville and racial tensions added another strain to the process.



Fig. 2. Image of a copper medal as it was revealed inside the time capsule. The metal is bright, in contrast to the surrounding gray pulp of the paper.

Factors in the Decision to Stop Salvage

When everything had been removed from the copper box and the extent of the damage was fully revealed, it became clear that the majority of the paper-based objects were unsalvageable. Together with the director of Equity and Inclusion from the county and the UVA Library curator of 20th-century materials, conservation staff decided to separate pages to allow for identification of the book it was from, photodocument the revealed page or spread, and then stop. A staff member who is a freelance photographer came into the lab to help with this documentation.

With the extremely poor condition of the paper, individual sheets could not be separated without extreme focus and a lot of time. Considering that the author is the only book and paper conservator at UVA Library, there were simply not enough staff members or resources to peel apart thousands of pieces of paper that no longer had any structure. Furthermore, being print materials in an area that UVA actively collects, copies of most of the works already existed in the Special Collections, so peeling apart pages would not have provided new insight. The physical condition of the items in the time capsule was the insight that the curator found the most important, and that was being documented.



Fig. 3. The paper-based items in the time capsule had been soaking in acidic water. Although they retained vestiges of their original shape, the paper was soft and mushy, having lost all structure. Courtesy of Nicole Royal.



Fig. 4. Some pages that were thicker, or of a better quality, could be peeled away in sections. Courtesy of Eze Amos.



Fig. 5. A picture postcard of the UVA chapel. On the left, immediately after the postcard had been removed from the time capsule. On the right, after the postcard had dried. Courtesy of Eze Amos.

The health of all involved in the salvage was also a factor in limiting the intervention time on the paper-based items. Because this was happening during the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone in the lab that day was wearing cloth masks. At first the masks were effective in blocking the smell, but it became so overpowering that despite the fume extractor running, both conservation staff members had to put on respirators halfway through the day. After hours leaning over a table of muck, the smell was nauseating.

Finally, the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library has made a commitment to dismantling white supremacy in the archives and uplifting marginalized voices, and in 2020 the conservator added reparative conservation as one of the highest priorities for treatment. This was another important reason to restructure the salvage approach to one of documentation.

In the midst of these very real and powerful reasons to stop, there was also a paradoxical push to keep going. This was likely due in part to conservation training, as well as to self-doubt experienced by the conservator and the fear of judgment from the profession or from the community for doing too much or too little (fig. 6).

AFTER THE SALVAGE

All things considered, the number of items recovered from the metal box was surprising, given the conditions in the hole. The metal and textile items are currently being kept in housing that aims to achieve appropriate humidity conditions until they can be transferred to Special Collections, and the copper box will receive treatment from a partner agency. The photodocumentation taken during the salvage will become part of the record for the time capsule, and recent 3D scanning of the bullets and badges will also provide important



Fig. 6. The contents of the time capsule, laid out in the artifact sink. Courtesy of Nicole Royal.

data. Paper that was peeled off into thin sections was laid to dry on the drying rack in the lab, and a few thicker sections were sent to be frozen in the department's freezer.

The goal for these items is that they will be accessible for community members to research and observe. The Nau Center for Civil War History at UVA teaches such classes as “Civil War in Myth and Memory,” for which the time capsule would be an excellent artifact to consider in terms of how citizens in the area constructed the Lost Cause narrative. Furthermore, discussions around why citizens did not want the time capsule opened, and what it means that it was brought to light, would engage students in productive discussions about myth, memory, and harmful histories.

Removing the statue and time capsule but preserving the harmful history serves not only as evidence of the past in the hopes of not repeating its atrocities but also lays down the framework to rebuild, metaphorically and literally. Once the cement had been removed and the earth leveled, a layer of straw and grass was laid down. This marked a meaningful step forward, as people can now walk into their courthouse

without passing by a monumental intimidation tactic. But work must continue (fig. 7).

Community

From the beginning of the author’s involvement with the time capsule, there was an incredible amount of anxiety over how the community would respond and over the lack of engagement from administration about the impact of the time capsule. Additionally, there was an embargo on communication since Albemarle County retained official ownership of the time capsule until a Board of Supervisors meeting held in November 2020. Upon lifting the embargo after the board meeting, articles and photos in local coverage gave the impression that salvage was ongoing, two months after it had actually stopped. The inconsistency was addressed at a library collections meeting to assure colleagues that salvage efforts had only taken one day, but Black committee members voiced



Fig. 7. The Albemarle County Courthouse after the statue was removed. Straw and grass were laid down, symbolizing healing and renewal. Courtesy of Kristin Jensen.

their dismay at how it had been presented in the media, and they reported sentiments of betrayal and continued distrust of UVA in the local community.

To counter the discrepancy and to describe the actions that Special Collections, the Preservation Department, and the Nau Center for Civil War History were taking and why it is important to preserve objects that evoke harmful histories, members of these three entities, with Albemarle County's approval and encouragement, gave a virtual presentation to the community in January 2021. When outlining the approach for the January 2021 presentation to administration, the author was told she had a "unique way of complicating things." Although this is no doubt true, explaining one's position and anticipating questions or concerns seems like an overcomplication that is worth committing to. And since one's level of engagement will not always be the same as the administration's, the author recognized with this experience the need to be vocal about the anticipated physical and emotional impact on colleagues, community, and conservation staff, as well as about the duration of a treatment on an item with a harmful history. Preserving the time capsule helps tell the whole dirty, complicated story of Charlottesville and Albemarle County, but it was also important to preserve the author's time to work on items that amplify Black voices and experiences, such as the Jessie Fuller scrapbook (note 3). One of the most poignant lessons learned during this was how necessary it is to share decisions, in as timely a manner as possible, when it comes to items with harmful histories.

Thirty-five people attended the presentation live on Zoom, and the video had been viewed 125 times as of late April 2021. Although the COVID-19 pandemic reduced opportunities to actively engage with community members, the ability to record such presentations does help with access, and there is hope that the people interested in knowing about the time capsule can still find out about the library's preservation efforts through this recording.

CONSERVATOR AND STAKEHOLDER

Conservators treat and observe the physical qualities of objects in their care, but they are also keenly aware of objects' stories. In his talk "Conservation Is Not Neutral," Fletcher Durant states, "It is our job as conservators, in consultation with curators and owners and stakeholders, to decide which stories we want our objects to tell. Some stories are simpler than others" (Durant 2020, p. 5). The *At Ready* time capsule salvage experience illustrates the nuance of feelings a conservator might feel in such situations. The author/conservator felt deeply connected, in at points surprising ways, to the salvage, and it felt increasingly critical to speak about the salvage approach to curators, administration, and the community, especially in light of the internal and external pressures that were present. These pressures may be familiar to conservators

who have responded to disasters but were unanticipated for this circumstance. It was the desire to help others who may find themselves in the position of salvaging Confederate time capsules in the future that motivated the author to share and reflect on these experiences and hopefully encourage dialogue about the impact of preserving harmful histories and the role conservators can have in prioritizing conservation treatments.

Preserving the time capsule and its contents serves as evidence of some of humanity's darkest moments, as do the artifacts in museums dedicated to memorializing lives lost to genocide and other tragedies. People already deny the message behind the statues commemorating the Lost Cause, but this copper box of Confederate items is undeniable, and that is why preserving it is essential. After all, cultural heritage collections are filled with the worst and the best of humanity, and conservators are sometimes asked to treat both.

It is not enough to simply do the preserving, however. It is vital to recognize what preserving can mean to a community and to acknowledge the inherent complexities of local history. The trajectory of the *At Ready* statue is harmful and ugly, representing immensely painful rhetoric, beliefs, injustices, and deaths. Nevertheless, the same community that erected the *At Ready* statue voted to take it down 111 years later, so the time capsule's physical presence above ground also reflects the power of communities and the power of change. Adding to that complication, UVA struggles with the weight of 200 years of prejudice and racism, and the optics of the author, a white woman, preserving a Confederate time capsule as a University employee is understandably difficult to accept as any form of progress. But the time capsule's removal from that foundation allowed a place tainted with hatred and oppression to be returned to a site of justice, and while putting a Confederate time capsule in the archives might not look like progress right now, the fact that it saw light of day at all is momentum in the right direction.

Providing appropriate context to items with harmful histories can help continue this momentum. Museums and libraries can protect and be aware of the importance of preserving items with harmful histories without endorsing what the items represent, but this has to be specific and intentional. UVA Library can preserve the time capsule as evidence *and* focus on reparative work in the archives and reparative conservation in the lab. These are not contradictory actions but different parts of the same effort to preserve history and evidence for the future. Similarly, the traits and training of good conservators also makes them good advocates and can help their colleagues and communities make important decisions. The author's privilege of being a white woman employed at a university and specifically in a library that is trying to dismantle white supremacy carries a responsibility to continue complicating things in her unique way, and to be an active advocate for reparative work. Thus, in talking about and prioritizing reparative work, it is possible to fill the roles of both conservator and stakeholder, despite the professional pull to stay "neutral."

UPDATE

Following a change in state law in July 2020 and a Virginia Supreme Court ruling in April 2021, the Charlottesville City Council finally voted in June 2021 to remove the statues of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. What started as a petition by Zyahna Bryant, then a teenager in high school, came to fruition on July 10 and 11, 2021, when these two Confederate statues, along with two other statues depicting violence against indigenous people in the city were removed, including a statue on UVA Grounds. Countless people in Charlottesville and all over the world woke up on July 12, one month before the four-year anniversary of the death of Heather Heyer, with more hope that movement on the path to progress and dismantling white supremacy will continue.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES

1. After a phone conversation with Dr. Sarah Beetham, an expert on Civil War monuments and memorials.
2. Curator Christina Keyser Vida of the Valentine Museum in Richmond and State Archaeological Conservator Kate Ridgway of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources observed in December 2021 that boxes placed under Confederate monuments would be better described as “cornerstone boxes” since they predate the notion of time capsules and had no anticipated date of opening.
3. “The Jessie Fuller Scrapbook: Balancing Access and Context in the Treatment of an Important Black Sorority Scrapbook from 1949 with a Unique but Damaging Structure.” Presented with Krystal Appiah at the 2021 AIC Annual Meeting, June 15, 2021.

REFERENCE

Durant, Fletcher. 2020. “Conservation Is Not Neutral.” *Icon* 2020. <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/IR00010800/00001>.

SUE DONOVAN, SHE/HER

Conservator for Special Collections

Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia

Charlottesville, VA

suedonovan@virginia.edu