



*Toppled head of monument to
Aleksandr III, Moscow, 1918.*

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Not long after the coup that launched the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Vladimir Lenin's mind turned to monuments. Under his name, an initiative proposing symbolic statuary in public space—called the Plan for Monumental Propaganda—was presented to the new People's Soviet in April 1918. It was a two-part program comprising both the "Removal of Monuments Erected in Honor of the Tsars and Their Servants" and the "Production of Projects for Monuments to the Russian Socialist Revolution."¹ Neither happened quickly enough for Lenin. Already in May 1918, he chastised Anatolii Lunacharskii, his Commissar of Enlightenment, for the fact that so many tsarist monuments remained, and ordered him to move swiftly in using unemployed workers to demolish the rest.² Iconoclasm of this sort seems a singularly paradigmatic act of revolution: a force—an act of violence—aimed at the past in order to make way for the future.

By August, a list of sixty-six exemplary figures suitable for monumentalization had been disseminated. It counted expected names—Marx, Engels, Spartacus, Robespierre—as well as a few more surprising ones, including the Romantic composer Frédéric Chopin and the Symbolist artist Mikhail Vrubel'. Artists were solicited through IZO Narkompros (the fine-arts section of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) to produce monuments to these revolutionary heroes in temporary materials, such as plaster or papier-mâché, with the idea that the public would then choose which would be rendered more permanently into bronze and marble. Yet by the first anniversary of the revolution, only nine of the temporary sort had been erected.³

Many of those who were charged with administering the Plan for Monumental Propaganda were also artists of the avant-garde—those nurtured through Sunday salons at Sergei Shchukhin's, cabaret evenings at the Stray Dog café, literary societies, and sojourns in Paris and Munich. The alliance forged between these left-leaning intellectuals and the Bolshevik leadership represented

1. Cited in Christina Lodder, "Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda," in *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917–1992*, ed. Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 20.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 23.



Unveiling of the Monument to Sofia Perovskaia in front of Moscow Station, Petrograd, December 20, 1918. Anatolii Lunacharskii towards center with dark goatee and Vladimir Tatlin at far left in workers' cap.

one of few moments in history in which the cultural avant-garde had power. Vladimir Tatlin, for example, who had shown his Counter-Reliefs—radical propositions for a new form of sculpture—at the *0.10* exhibition in Petrograd in 1915, joined IZO after the revolution as the head of the Moscow branch and played a role in administering the plan. Yet, as might be expected when an avant-garde artist is made a government functionary, Tatlin began by throwing a wrench into the works. In March 1919, as reported by the critic Nikokai Punin in the journal *Iskusstvo kommuny* (Art of the Commune), Tatlin not only launched a biting critique of the Plan for Monumental Propaganda but put forward a conceptual sketch that toppled the traditional idea of a monument itself.⁴ This provocation would ultimately take form as one of the most famous icons of the revolution, his design for the *Monument to the Third International* (1920).

In its initial formulation, what Tatlin proposed was not a tribute to an extraordinary individual but rather, as Punin conveyed it, “a modern technical apparatus promoting agitation and propaganda,” one that carries the spectator, “against his or her

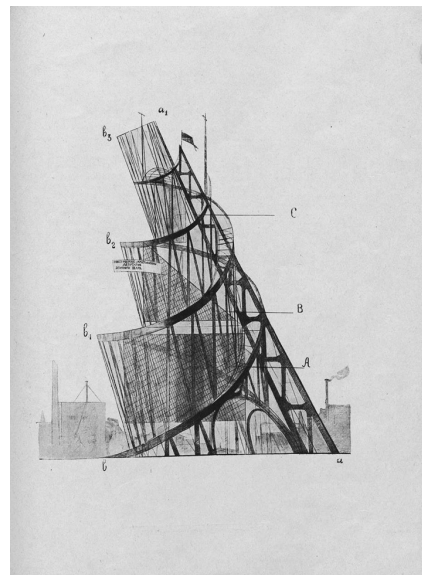
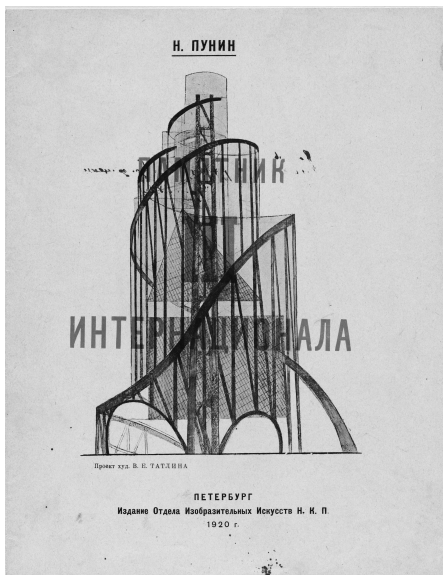
4. Maria Gough, “Model Exhibition,” *October* 150 (Fall 2014), p. 13.

will,” on a journey through its mechanical interior with flashing news, political decrees, and fragments of creative thought itself.⁵ When Maria Gough wrote about Tatlin’s idea recently, she called it “a gigantic, mobility-mad, multitasking, spectacle-producing communication device dedicated to revolutionary agitation.”⁶ Given the stress on countering individual will, it is also one that aligns itself with the force of state, with the need to *make* revolution with an authoritarian consciousness-producing machine. Tatlin published images the next year, again with text by Punin, which gave greater form to this idea: a 400-meter tower in iron with “three great rooms of glass” connected by mechanical systems of a type that had not yet been invented. The lower cubic form was to house the legislative assembly and rotate once a year; a pyramid on the second tier would house the executive body and rotate once a month; and an upper cylinder would provide information services, broadcasting news, proclamations and slogans, with a radio mast topping the whole.⁷ With this vision, Tatlin revolutionized a revolutionary plan, creating something that one might call radically anti-monumental. Of course, Tatlin’s monument, though offered as a manifesto, image, and model, was not built.

5. “Nikolai Punin, “O pamiatnikakh,” *Iskusstvo kommuny* 14 (March 9, 1919), pp. 2–3; partial trans. in Troels Andersen, *Vladimir Tatlin* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1968), pp. 56–57.

6. Gough, “Model Exhibition,” p. 13.

7. Nikolai Punin, *Pamiatnik III Internatsionala* (Petrograd: IZO Narkompros, 1920); trans. as “The Monument to the Third International,” in *Tatlin*, ed. Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), pp. 344–47.



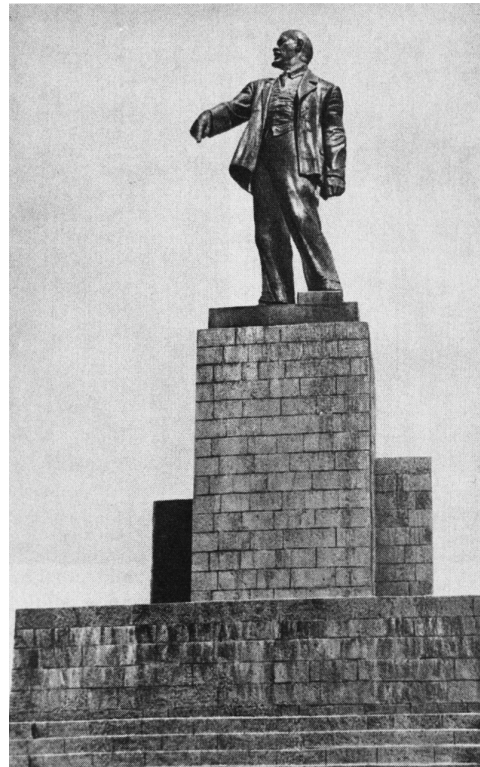
Vladimir Tatlin. *Designs for Monument to the Third International, published in Nikolai Punin's Pamiatnik III Internatsionala, 1920.*

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Others were. Scores of monuments were produced in the wake of the revolution, taking a much different form. After the enthusiasm for monument-building seen in the immediate wake of the revolution waned, interest resurged with the death of Lenin in 1924, resulting in new campaigns of monument erection. Among the first, commissioned from Ivan Shadr in 1925, was the Monument to Lenin built for the inauguration of the Zemo-Avchalskaya hydroelectric power plant near Tbilisi. Trained before the revolution in Ekaterinburg and Saint Petersburg, and in Rome and Paris, where he worked with Rodin and Bourdelle, Shadr, too, had been an early participant in the Plan for Monumental Propaganda, creating plaster reliefs of class warriors for reproduction on banknotes, bonds, and stamps, including *The Red Army Soldier*, *The Worker*, *The Sower*, and *The Peasant* (all 1922), which all found their way into the collections of the Museum of the Revolution of the U.S.S.R. in Moscow.

Shadr's monument was ready by 1927, the revolution's tenth-anniversary year: a giant sculptural representation of Lenin, arm outstretched in a distinctive gesture with index finger pointed downwards for oratorical emphasis. It was placed on an equally monumental rough-hewn stone plinth, rising to an extraordinary eleven meters above the dam to be seen against the rocky, mountainous landscape. Zemo-Avchalskaya, among the first hydroelectric plants to be built under Soviet rule, was located in Georgia, which had been incorporated into the Transcaucasian RSF in 1922, falling to the Red Army after efforts and vain appeals to Britain and other Western powers to maintain itself as an independent democratic republic. Construction on the power plant began the following year.

Like many works in the emerging idiom that would become known as Socialist Realism, Shadr's Zemo-Avchalskaya monument was



Ivan Shadr. Monument to V. I. Lenin at ZAGES. 1927.

K. A. Kuznetsov.
 Lenin speaking
 from a truck bed in
 Red Square, May 25,
 1919. 1919.



based on a photograph: here, a photo of Lenin speaking from a truck bed in Red Square. Shadr transported the figure of Lenin out of the photographic scene, away from the milling crowd and the vehicle that seems to interest at least one man in the audience more than the speech itself, enlarging it to gigantic scale and placing it on the massive pedestal. What's excised in the borrowing—in this case, the makeshift rostrum and the less-than-rapt listener—signals the way that monuments reinforce what is to be forgotten as much as what is to be remembered.

Most photographs of Lenin were well known: Only a few dozen were taken during his lifetime, and they were published frequently and ultimately catalogued. What's created in a work like Shadr's monument is a relay—between artwork and photo-document. One can say that it borrows the photograph's reality effect to create a kind of "truthiness." At least that's what I argued in first discussing these images.⁸ But the fact that these photographs were known, published, and circulated also allows the discrepancy—the gap—to be seen, to be exposed as a lie. Here's the rub: It doesn't seem to matter. Sight is replaced with belief, then rendered as image.

The writings of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, a student of Bergson and Durkheim, offer insight. Beginning in the 1920s, Halbwachs put forward a notion of collective memory—of memory as socially constructed—that was shaped by the studies he had read in his post at the war ministry of traumatized World War I veterans written by British neurologist Henry Head. "What [someone with aphasia] lacks," Halbwachs wrote, "is less memories themselves than the

8. Leah Dickerman, "Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography," *October* 93 (Summer 2000), pp. 138–53.

framework in which to situate them.”⁹ Collective memory was defined, he argued, by social modes of framing, ways of integrating individual understanding within a cultural context, the kind of work that these monuments do—here, for example, by framing Lenin as a revolutionary orator, as a modernizer bringing electricity to the realm, and as a controlling presence in Georgia.

Monuments became a key part of Soviet strategy on the ideological front, and Shadr a key producer: He created sixteen separate monuments to Lenin before his death in 1941, a number that provides some sense of the acceleration of monument-building. That proliferation was understood as the strategic key to securing territory ideologically is suggested by the sheer number of Soviet-era statues of Lenin—1,320—that were recently removed from towns, villages, and cities across Ukraine.¹⁰ The law ordering their dismantling—as well as the renaming of streets and public buildings—was issued in May 2015, in the wake of more recent Russian military incursions.

While crowds across the former Soviet sphere celebrated the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 by pulling monuments dedicated to Soviet leaders from their perches, including Shadr’s monument at Zemo-Avchalskaya, there has been reluctance in Russia, after that initial iconoclastic flush, to remove monuments, especially those dedicated to Lenin. Moscow, for example, has preserved many of its communist-era monuments. As of 2012, at least eighty-two Lenin monuments could still be counted in the city.¹¹ Most notably, Lenin’s tomb, the stone mausoleum-cum-viewing station designed by Aleksei Shchusev and housing the Bolshevik leader’s body (or some effigy of it), remains where it has been on Red Square since 1930.

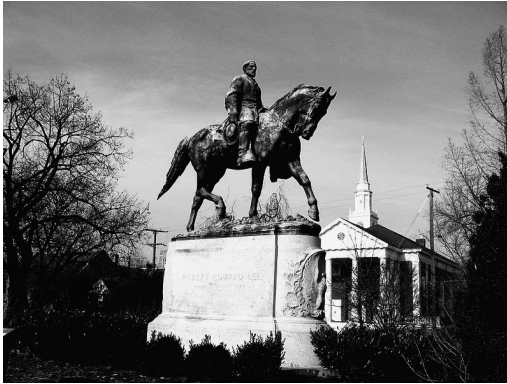
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Also in 1917, that same revolutionary year, a monument of Robert E. Lee was commissioned for a parcel of land in Charlottesville, Virginia, from the New York sculptor Henry Shrady, who at the time was also occupied with designing the sculptural components of the Ulysses S. Grant Memorial in front of the US Capitol in Washington, D.C. The Lee monument was completed after Shrady’s death by the Italian American sculptor Leo Lentelli and was ultimately dedicated in 1924 at a two-day gathering of hundreds hosted by the Sons of Confederate Veterans and accompanied by intermittent provocations by members of the Ku Klux Klan, the group founded by Confederate veterans in 1866, just after the Civil War. Among the bless-

9. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 112; and discussed in David Rieff, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 23.

10. Reported in Greg Wilford, “Ukraine Has Removed All 1,320 Statues of Lenin,” *The Independent*, August 20, 2017, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/lenin-statues-removed-soviet-union-russia-crimea-ukraine-bolshevik-communist-petro-poroshenko-a7903611.html.

11. “Lenin, Lenin Everywhere,” *Moscow Times*, July 16, 2012.



*Henry Shrady and Leo Lentelli.
Monument to Robert E. Lee,
Charlottesville, Virginia. 1924.*

ings bestowed were those by the SOVC grand commander, C. B. Linney: “I thank God that we have lost nothing of our love for the cause by the lapse of time, which has wisely served to intensify our devotion, and will only reach its last climax when we have ceased to live, and answered the last roll call.”¹² Monuments were among the expressions of this devotion.

Though not based on a photograph, the Charlottesville monument resembles other widely seen images of Lee in print and sculptural form: It adheres closely to the monument of the Confederate

leader by the French academic sculptor Marius Jean Antonin Mercié, unveiled in Richmond Virginia in 1890, one of the first to be erected after Lee’s death, in which Lee is also shown in his military uniform seated astride his horse, hat humbly in hand. Mercié’s sculpture was in turn based on a lithograph by Adalbert Volck, a Baltimore dentist who produced pictorial propaganda for the Confederate cause, which was published in 1876 by the Lee Monuments Association and distributed in exchange for contributions to the monuments fund.¹³ Modern monuments such as this one extend from the culture of mechanical reproduction: They are defined by their essential reproducibility and connection to the circulation of images.

In its generalized nobility—a military leader depicted without violent display or aggressive stance—the Charlottesville monument conforms to the assertion of a fictionalized Lee, hero of the Lost Cause, who rode a horse called Traveller and was, in this telling, a brilliant strategist and sterling man who abhorred slavery. Indeed, the central tenet of the Lost Cause mythology is that the Civil War was not fought over slavery. Traveller may be the point of “truthiness” here: The horse was so much the focus of Lee mythology that Lentelli traveled to measure its skeleton in his work on preparing the Charlottesville monument.¹⁴ Traveller’s bones were later mounted and displayed in Lee Chapel at Washington and Lee University in

12. Full text of the Proceedings of the 37th Annual Reunion of the Virginia Grand Camp of Confederate Veterans and of the 29th Reunion of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, archive.org/stream/ProceedingsOfTheThirty-seventhAnnualReunionOfTheVirginiaGrandCamp/GCCV2_djvu.txt.

13. Robert A. Carter and Jennifer W. Murdock, Robert E. Lee Monument, Richmond, VA, Registration Form 1—900-a, National Register of Historic Places, August 2006. Downloaded at [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_E._Lee_Monument_\(Richmond,_Virginia\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_E._Lee_Monument_(Richmond,_Virginia)).

14. www.charlottesville.org/departments-and-services/departments-h-z/parks-recreation/parks-trails/city-parks/emancipation-park-formerly-known-as-lee-park/history-and-gardens-of-emancipation-park.

Lexington, Virginia, in 1929, until they were finally interred near the Lee-family crypt in 1971, a story of a sanctified original that evokes the similar role played by Lenin's embalmed body in the Soviet context. Getting Traveller right, down to the height of his withers, may indeed have served the function of the monument in generating a collective narrative: The French historian Ernest Renan understood the workings of collective memory as the production of strong emotions with a sprinkling of motley fact.¹⁵

The Confederates were, of course, revolutionaries in the most literal sense: They sought to secede from the United States of America in order to hold on to the economic privileges of slavery. Yet the monuments erected in their honor, as many have noted in the context of recent discussions, were not built by Confederate veterans themselves or by their contemporaries—indeed, few were erected in the immediate wake of the Civil War—but rather by their descendants and political heirs. Some distance from traumatic historical events may be required for comfortable mythmaking. But across the years, hundreds of Confederate monuments were produced in a multi-decade campaign of proliferation: Over 700 are documented in a 2015 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center, with Virginia (96), Georgia (90), and North Carolina (90) having the most, a fair share spread across the eight other states that seceded from the Union, and a scattering more in states that were not part of the Confederacy.¹⁶

The SPLC report shows two periods in which monument erection spiked. The first and larger of the two campaigns began around 1900 and extended through the 1920s. This was the period in which backlash against the gains of black citizens led to the consolidation of Jim Crow laws, and it encompassed the beginning of the Great Migration, the exodus of black Americans from the South, and the second flourishing of the Ku Klux Klan. The second takes place between 1954 and 1968, between the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., that is, the years of the civil-rights movement. In this sense, the Charlottesville monument commissioned in 1917 and erected in Virginia is utterly typical.¹⁷ What does it mean that the erection of Confederate statuary surged just a few years before the Great Migration began, and continued across its first decade? To see this connection helps paint a picture of the uses of monuments in the United States: As African-Americans began to stream northward in the thousands, fleeing racial oppression and terror—the number would ultimately be six million, the largest demographic event in our country's history—Confederate monuments multiplied as tangible markers of the political ambitions to deny black Americans the full fruits of citizenship as well as their place in history. Each was a stake in the ground representing those who, without mentioning

15. The discussion of Renan here comes via Rieff, *In Praise of Forgetting*, p. 35.

16. Southern Poverty Law Center, "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy," April 21, 2016, pp. 10–11. Download at www.splcenter.org/20160421/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–15.

the word *slavery*, sought to perpetuate its legacy. Each was a counterclaim to those who were voting with their feet.

The numbers suggest that pervasiveness *was* the strategy behind Confederate monument-building, the Confederate monument deployed, like the Soviet one, as a way of claiming territory. Nothing comparable in quantity honors the winning side of the North, and of course, very little at all marks and memorializes the sacrifices of victims of racial terror. This monumental proliferation makes a claim on history: that if the South had been defeated militarily, it was not bested, not defeated ideologically. The dedication to a monument erected in Anderson County, South Carolina, in 1902 underscores this not-so-implicit point, reading in part: “The world shall yet decide, in truth’s clear, far-off light, that the soldiers who wore the gray, and died with Lee, were in the right.”¹⁸ (Little has changed in this regard: The current website for the Virginia division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans echoes the same: “Our ancestors may have been Out-Numbered, Out-Gunned and Out-Supplied. BUT NEVER OUT FOUGHT,” with a disdain for the historical record that is still breathtaking.)¹⁹

The monument was not a new form in this early-twentieth-century moment, but rather one with a long and storied tradition. Yet there is something new in this kind of strategic pervasion, in this “monumental propaganda,” to use the Soviet term: We might see it as a moment when the mass reproductive strategies of modern media culture were reactivated within the anachronistic form of traditional commemorative sculpture. In the case of Confederate monuments, however, the strategy of proliferation was executed not by the revolutionary victors but by those whose cause was “lost.” The fact that so many Confederate monuments were erected despite this historical failure signals a considerable concession of federal power—indeed, a concession great enough to make one wonder if the hundreds of Confederate monuments built in these years do indeed represent a victory on the ideological front, the statuary manifestation of political advantage gained by the forces of Jim Crow.

Sophie Abramowitz, Eva Latterner, and Gillet Rosenblith, three UVA graduate students, have gone further to argue that the Confederate monuments erected in Charlottesville in the 1920s delimited racial boundaries within the city itself, and were placed at the borders of black and immigrant communities to cordon off “white” spaces.²⁰ The Robert E. Lee Monument and Lee Park itself sat within a few blocks of Vinegar Hill, a thriving black community, while Jackson Park, and its monumental focus, an equestrian statue of Stonewall Jackson dedicated in 1921, were positioned above McKee Row, another black neighborhood. In 1914, land for that park had been confiscated by the city from its black residents by the

18. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 11.

19. www.scvvirginia.org.

20. Sophie Abramowitz, Eva Latterner, and Gillet Rosenblith, “Tools of Displacement: How Charlottesville, Virginia’s Confederate Statues Helped Decimate the City’s Historically Successful Black Communities,” *Slate*, June 23, 2017, www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2017/06/how_charlottesville_s_confederate_statues_helped_decimate_the_city_s_historically.html.

Albemarle County Board of Supervisors. The reason to consider the removal of certain monuments is not only their distortions of history, grievous though they may be, but also the claims they make upon the future, upon what Americans remember, and what they forget.

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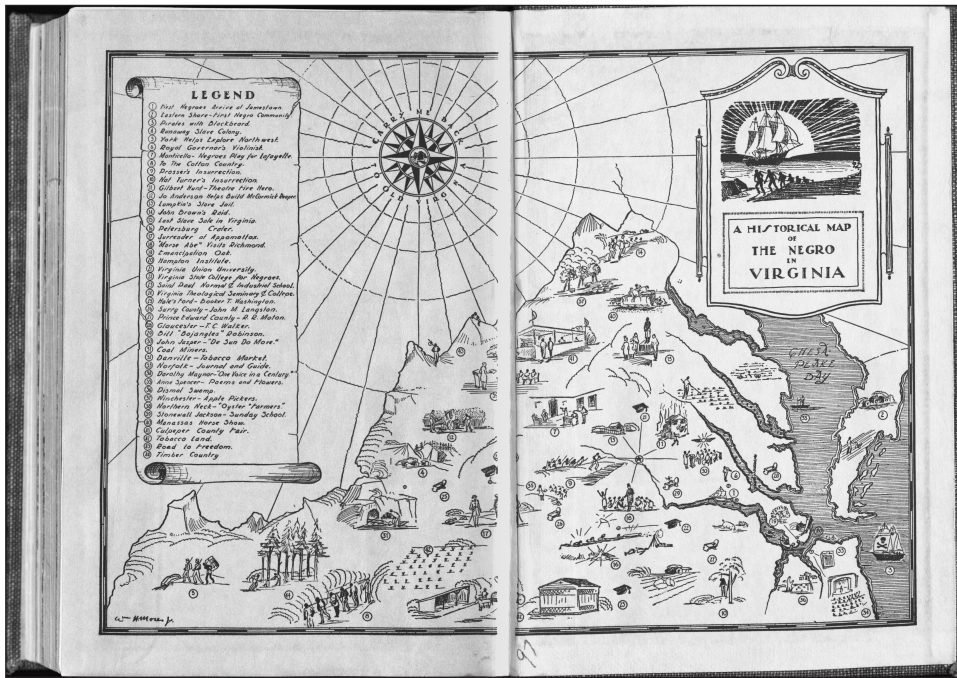
Could an alternative commemorative landscape be imagined? One vision is suggested in the endpapers of the book *The Negro in Virginia*, published in 1940 with the subtitle “Compiled by Workers of the Writers’ Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Virginia.”²¹ Drawn by the U. Penn-educated architect William H. Moses, Jr.—who had won the design competition for the Virginia state pavilion for the 1939 World’s Expo in Queens, but who was not listed as project architect because of his race—the papers present an illustrated map of Virginia indicating sites where black Americans played a critical historical, economic, and cultural role, each with a drawing and number to be correlated to a legend at the right. The first of these memory-sites is the arrival of slaves in Jamestown in 1619. Some mark episodes of resistance, such as #10—Nat Turner’s Rebellion—and #14, John Brown’s raid; yet others mark sites of cruel notoriety, such as #13—Lumpkin’s Slave Jail in Richmond, which served as both human clearinghouse and prison. The Civil War was represented not through a cult of valiant bravery and noble gentility, but rather by #16—the Battle of Crater, a rout of Union forces that turned into a racial massacre, with many United States Colored Troops killed after surrendering,²² and #17—the surrender at Appomattox. The contributions of African-American labor are called out with points across the state denoting work in the cotton fields, coal mines, apple orchards, oyster farms, tobacco fields, and timber forests. Indeed, Lewis describes the volume as “the written record of the people who have helped build America.”²³ The heroism of Gilbert Hunt, an enslaved blacksmith who, in 1811, rescued victims of a theater fire in Richmond, is recognized, as are African American institutions of higher learning.²⁴ I am struck by the way Moses’s map stands as key to a commemorative landscape of a different kind: It pictures a collective historical realm with sites and subjects of the type that might have been proposed and realized as monuments in a political reality different from the one its authors faced, a reality that rendered this impossible. It can be seen as a map of

21. Roscoe Lewis, ed., *The Negro in Virginia: Compiled by Workers of the Writers’ Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Virginia* (New York: Hastings House, 1940). The 1994 reedition does not include the endpapers. For an enlargeable reproduction of the endpapers, see Kendra Hamilton, “The Negro in Virginia,” in *The Encyclopedia of Virginia*, www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Negro_in_Virginia_The_1940#start_entry.

22. Richard Slotkin, “The Battle of Crater,” *New York Times*, July 29, 2014, opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/07/29/the-battle-of-the-crater/.

23. Roscoe Lewis, “Preface,” in *The Negro in Virginia*, p. xx.

24. Ibid.



Illustrated endpapers by William H. Moses, Jr., for *The Negro in Virginia*. 1940.

monuments that might have been, ones often still yet to be built. If we think of monuments as the expression of forms of collective memory, as doing a kind of political “editing” of the past, what has been excised in works like Shrady’s monument to Lee is here made visible in a bid for remembrance.

Moses’s endpapers announce and encapsulate what is inside: The book as a whole can be seen to offer a kind of counter-monument to those extolling the Lost Cause. Published by the Works Projects Administration in the State of Virginia, it was born of many of the activities and aspirations of the WPA’s federal Office of Negro Affairs. In 1936, the acclaimed poet Sterling Brown, the Williams- and Harvard-educated child of a father born into slavery, was appointed to lead the new office and given the title of National Editor of Negro Affairs. Brown was already well known to Holger Cahill, who was the national director of the Federal Art Project within the WPA; they had served together along with Lawrence Reddick, Carter Woodson, Alain Locke, and other notable figures on the organizing committee of the exhibition held in honor of the 75th anniversary of the Thirteenth Amendment at the Library of Congress, which like *The Negro in Virginia* traced a narrative of the achievements of black citizenry from slavery to the present.²⁵ Brown saw the role of the divi-

25. 75 Years of Freedom: Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the Proclamation of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, December 18, 1940 (USGPO, Library of Congress, 1943).

sion as shaping the representation of African-Americans within WPA initiatives—“to present the Negro race adequately and without bias.”²⁶ As part of this mission, he embraced a project initiated by Reddick in 1934, then a faculty member at Kentucky State University, through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA): Reddick had supervised twelve black graduate students to collect the testimony of 250 ex-slaves. The project had since foundered.²⁷ Brown may have seen opportunity within the Federal Writers’ Project’s broad commitment to collecting the “life histories of ordinary Americans” with the ambition of creating a mosaic portrait of everyday life in America: Ultimately, first-person narratives of over 10,000 men and women from a variety of regions, backgrounds, and occupations were recorded by writers on the FWP payroll. Brown folded the slave-narrative initiative into the WPA in 1936, bringing it to new scale. Through Writers’ Project units based in individual states, writer-reporters were sent into the field to record oral histories of those who had been held in slavery. Alan Lomax’s Folklore Division joined a year later, and efforts were made, if inconsistently, to apply the methodology of that discipline, publishing handbooks on methods and procedures, standardizing questions, making tape recordings of the sessions, and encouraging photography. Fourteen states ultimately participated, Virginia among them.

After federal funding ended in 1939, some of the slave-narrative projects continued within state units until 1943. In the end, some 2,000 interviews were conducted, representing approximately two percent of the population of those who had lived in slavery at the time of emancipation.²⁸ Brown’s federal oversight at times produced conflicts with the state units. As Catherine Stewart has documented, members of those units—some belonging to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, founded in 1894 to memorialize Confederate sacrifice through the promotion of what they saw as a true history of the South—made efforts to exclude testimony that did not conform to a vision of slavery as a benevolent institution.²⁹ Cuts, revisions, and redactions of both minor and major impact were made to transcripts, despite urgings by Brown’s federal office against excisions of any kind.

The Negro in Virginia was among the most ambitious of these endeavors. The book fits roughly within the rubric of the Federal Writers’ Project’s “American Guide” series, cultural and historical guides to states, territories, cities, and even highway systems, but was, as Roscoe Lewis described it, a signal effort to tell the history of the state from a “Negro point of view.”³⁰ Mobilizing the archive against Lost

26. WPA press release, “American Learns of Negro from Books of the FWP,” March 6, 1939, cited in Catherine Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers’ Project* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), p. 51.

27. Hamilton, “The Negro in Virginia.”

28. “The WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection,” Library of Congress website, footnote 16, www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/wpa-and-the-slave-narrative-collection/.

29. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, pp. 52–56.

30. Lewis, “Preface,” p. xx.

Cause mythology, the Virginia unit under Lewis in Virginia and Brown in Washington conceived a history rigorously constructed from primary documents, comprising scores of courthouse records and other archival materials as well as over 300 oral histories of elderly African-Americans, including 250 individuals born into slavery. The fourth chapter, called “The Narrators,” calls out by name many of those whose testimony serves to shape the book’s description of slavery in Virginia.³¹ They include Anna Harris, 92 years old, who in the years since emancipation had had “no white man . . . in my house. Don’t ’low it. Dey sole my sister Kate. I saw it wid dese here eyes. Sole her in 1860, and I ain’t seed nor heard of her since. Folks say white folks is all right dese days. Maybe dey is, maybe dey isn’t.”³² Sterling Brown recounted that he and Ulysses Lee, his colleague in the Department of Negro Affairs, took the manuscript and edited it into its final form themselves in an effort, it seems, to avoid manipulations of fact.³³ The book challenges the mythology embodied in Confederate monuments, countering “truthiness” with documents, data, and testimony, countering collective memory with history.

In his preface, Lewis reflected: “It is appropriate that the first WPA State book on the Negro be produced in Virginia: for here the first African natives were brought and held in enforced servitude; and here also, more than two centuries later, freedom for some 5,000,000 of their descendants was assured on the surrender grounds of Appomattox.”³⁴ Lewis’s words frame William Moses’s endpapers, in the sequence of markers that begin with the first slave ship at Jamestown, and the heraldic escutcheon containing the book’s title under an image of silhouetted black figures marching across dunes, with slave schooner at full sail seen in the bay behind, as well as its twenty-nine chapters that traverse the state’s years as slave economy, the contested meanings of the Civil War, the “black laws” of the Virginia Code put in place in the last decade of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth, to an accounting of present-day economic inequity and injustice at the hands of the courts. It is this premise—that these things are integrally linked, that the past still lives with us—that seems from the vantage point of today most boldly and cogently stated: that in order to answer the question that permeates WPA production—“What does it mean to be American?”—one must begin with slavery.

31. “The Narrators” (Chapter 4), in Lewis, *The Negro in Virginia*, pp. 29–37.

32. Cited in Lewis, *The Negro in Virginia*, p. 37.

33. In conversation with Charles L. Perdue, Jr. as reported in “Foreword,” in Lewis, *The Negro in Virginia*, p. xii.

34. Lewis, “Preface,” p. xx.