

# EVICTING ROBERT E. LEE AND STONEWALL JACKSON FROM THE HALL OF FAME FOR GREAT AMERICANS

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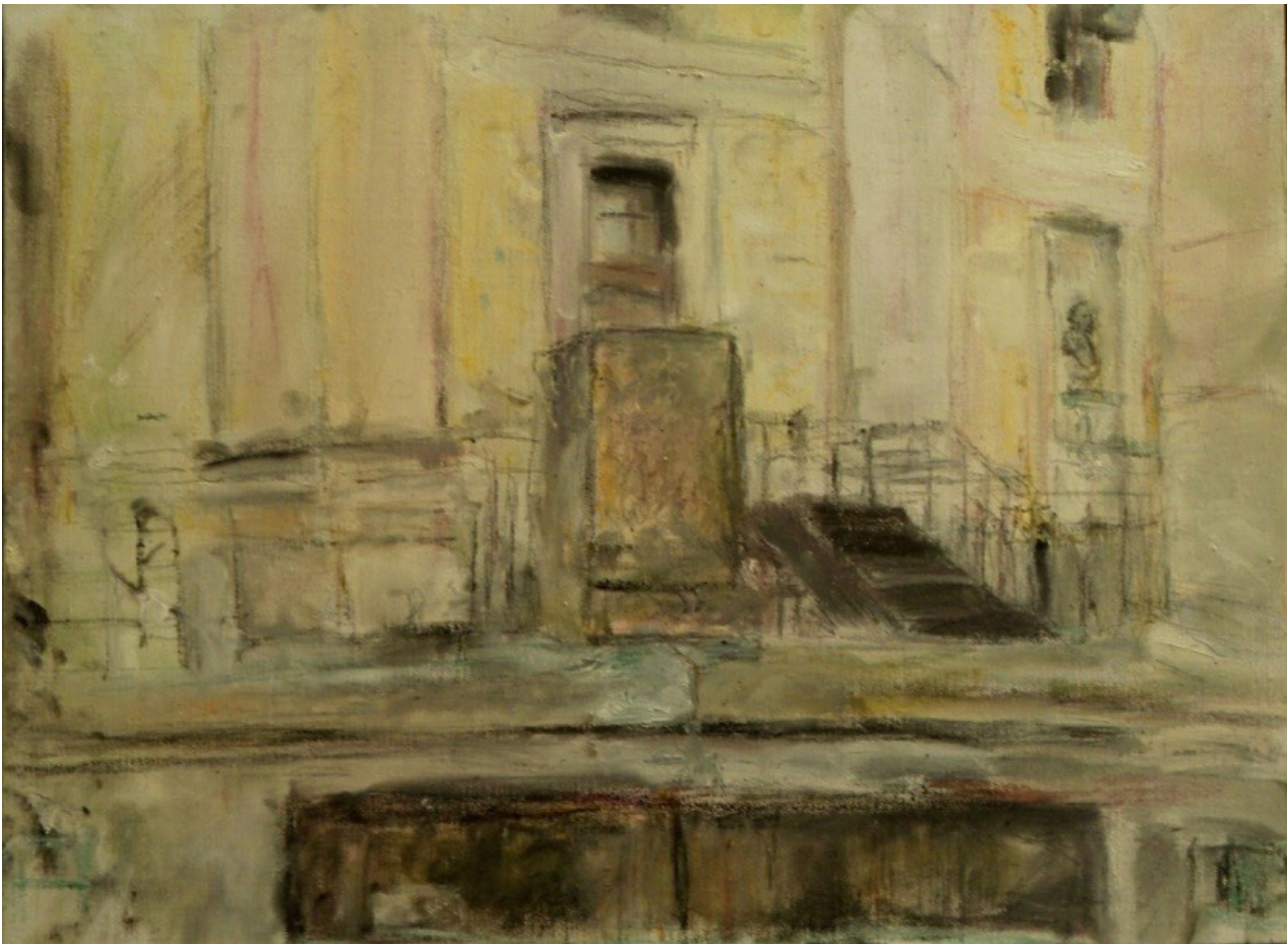
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## ABSTRACT

Evicting Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson from the Hall of Fame for Great Americans examines the removals of portrait busts of confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas 'Stonewall' Jackson from the Hall of Fame for Great Americans on the campus of the City University of New York's Bronx Community College in Bronx, NY after violence in defense of confederate monuments in Charlottesville, Virginia. The article explores these iconoclastic attacks as reflecting battles between factions over control of public squares in the U.S. in 2017 and in context of only one bust of a 'Great American' added to the hall in many decades.

## KEYWORDS

Contemporary iconoclasm | Confederate monuments | American Commemorative practices present and historically



**Fig. 01.** Howard Skrill, *Absence of the Portrait Bust of Robert E. Lee from Bronx Community College*, 20" x 17" oil stick, oil pastel, chalk pastel, graphite and colored pencil on linen board, ©2017

Rosalind Deutsche (Deutsche, 1996: 52) suggests that while people often view public spaces as organically arising and strictly utilitarian, that these places are in fact filled with politics. Art in public spaces is therefore particularly vulnerable to iconoclastic attacks as groups compete to 'speak through the City' (Deutsche, 1996: *ibid*) with public monuments as the fulcrum of these contests. Control of public spaces can shift between groups thus leading to iconoclastic attacks and evictions (Gamboni, 1997: 18) from prominent public places of extant public monuments.

On August 18th, 2017, at the order of the Governor of the State of New York, the busts of Confederate Generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson were removed from the Hall of Fame for Great Americans on the campus of Bronx Community College in Bronx, New York. Violent protests leading to three deaths, including a murder resulting from vehicular terrorism, took place in August 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia. The protestors who committed the violence were agitating against pending removals

of equestrian statues of Lee and Jackson from public spaces in Charlottesville. The removal of the busts featuring likenesses of these two confederate generals in the Bronx was a direct consequence of the violence in Charlottesville and equivocation over that violence by the American president.

The Hall of Fame for Great Americans sits on a high bluff towering over the shoreline of the Harlem River on the campus of Bronx Community College on the western edge of the campus. The hall offers uninterrupted and panoramic views of the cliff sides that extend northward and southward along the Hudson River on the Manhattan and New Jersey sides of the river. Also visible from the hall is the mountainous terrain of Hudson Highlands rising to the north. A steep drop-off descends from the Hall's sheer walls to the river's edge at the bottom of the cliff, with the river accessible from a road paralleling the campus. The appropriately named neighborhood of University Heights rises on the cliff's Eastern slope.



Bronze busts featuring likenesses of 'Great Americans' are secured to the ledges of low slung granite walls sitting beneath the concave roof of an open air arcade supported by Doric columns rising from the ledges. The busts sit on top of rectangular orange plinths speckled with blue. Unlit black lanterns hang from hooks in between the roof's transverse ribs.



**Fig. 02.** Howard Skrell, Portrait Bust of Robert E. Lee from Bronx Community College, 14" x 17" oil pastel on paper, ©2015



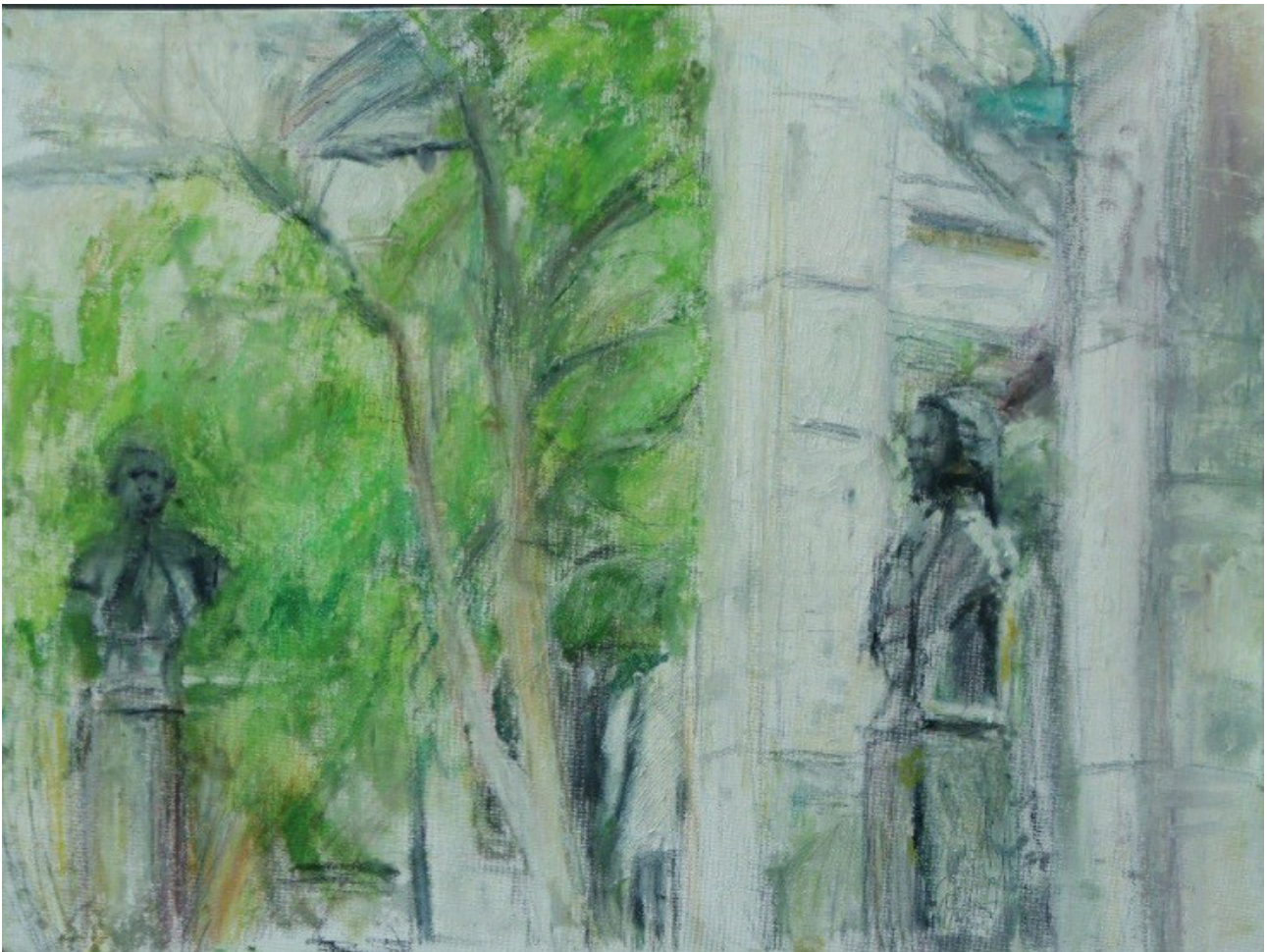
**Fig. 03.** Howard Skrell, Confederate War Memorial from Greenville, SC, 14" x 17", oil stick, oil pastel, chalk pastel, graphite and colored pencil on paper, ©2015

The 'Great Americans' are arranged in the hall into categories of business men, inventors, missionaries, explorers and other major groupings including 'distinguished men and women outside of these classes'.

Inscriptions embossed on large bronze panels attached to the ledges supporting the busts typically include quotations that summarize the individuals' world-views and that describe their principal accomplishments. The panels associated with the busts of Lee and Jackson were also removed.

The Great Americans include the founding father Nathan Hale, Presidents Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and John Quincy Adams, the businessman Andrew Carnegie (recognized as a philanthropist), scientists Thomas Alva Edison, Eli Whitney and George Washington Carver, the actor (Edwin) Booth, the artist Gilbert Stuart (sculptor), the songwriter Stephen Foster (musician) and the authors Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Mark Twain, Ninety eight honorees were included in the hall before the removals. Ninety six remain.

The United States is in the throes of sweeping iconoclasm In Charlottesville's aftermath, principally directed at monuments of confederate generals, political leaders and sympathizers such as Lee and Jackson, but extending to representations of other individuals who, in the shifts of factional power described by Deutsche, possessed worldviews or engaged in activities that newly empowered groups may perceive as offensive.



**Fig. 04.** Howard Skrill, Gould Memorial Library at Bronx Community College, 14" x 17" oil stick, oil pastel, chalk pastel, graphite and colored pencil on paper, ©2015

1. Sterling, Joe – "A new Alabama law makes sure Confederate monuments are here to stay". CNN, 5/26/17, [<http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/26/us/alabama-confederate-monuments-bill-trnd/index.html>],
2. <http://www.independentmail.com/story/news/2017/08/26/confederate-monument-greenville/604884001/>
3. <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-baltimore-confederate-monuments-list-20170814-htmlstory.html>



The iconoclasm is being unevenly applied. Confederate statues are being protected from attacks in Alabama by statute and popular consent (Sterling, CNN, 5/26/17).<sup>1</sup> In Greenville, South Carolina, a confederate soldier on a tall column guarding the entry to a cemetery with confederate graves has been a site for protesters demanding the statue's removal (Felicien and Ellis, *Independent Mail*, August 26, 2017).<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, control of 'speaking through the city' has shifted from those who advocate for the installation of confederate statues to those who advocate for the statues' removal. With days of Charlottesville, civic authorities in Baltimore,

Maryland had quickly removed an array of confederate monuments from public spaces within its city limits (Anon., *Baltimore Sun*, 8/14/17).<sup>3</sup> The removal of the busts of Lee and Jackson in the Bronx quickly followed. (Valentine and Golding, *New York Post*, 8/9/17).<sup>4</sup> The removals were on the behalf of or at the direct behest of groups markedly different from those that advocated for the creation and installation of the monuments in the first instance. The removals also enabled politicians undertaking iconoclastic attacks to stand in binary opposition to the President's fervent support of monuments' preservation that placed him in league with 'Unite the Right' groups, including avowed White Nationalists, that unleashed the violence in Charlottesville in defense of Confederate monuments' preservation. The federal administration came to power advocating for historically empowered groups, yet the president, their principal proponent; reacted with helpless impotence as newly empowered groups aggressively launched iconoclastic attacks against objects reflecting the identities of a large number of the president's followers. These attacks are being extended to include a broader array of representations that may offend newly empowered groups. In New York City, Mayor Bill DeBlasio has established a commission to examine the future disposition of monuments, street signs and other designations throughout the city relative to the overall ideology and actions of the designee (Heim, *The Gothamist*, 8/17/17).<sup>5</sup>

Trip Gabriel details the broader sweep of contemporary iconoclasm in an article entitled "Far From Dixie Outcry Grows over a Wider Array of Monuments" (Gabriel, *NYT*, 8/25/17).<sup>6</sup> The removals are the last major change to the hall during the past twenty five years. The last addition was a bronze likeness of President Franklin Roosevelt, installed in 1992 after twenty years of effort. No additional busts, with the exception of FDR, has been added in the last four or five decades. John F. Kennedy is not included in 'politicians' and Martin Luther King, Jr. is not included in 'statesmen'. No twentieth century musicians such as Aaron Copeland, Duke Ellington or George M. Cohan are included, Bronze likenesses of these and numerous other 20th century American personalities may remain permanently excluded; their absence not the consequence of arguments about their worthiness to be designated as 'Great Americans' but due to an inertia that decades ago has essentially frozen hall's commemorative mission. I am an artist who creates images and projects related to absences and ruin resulting from iconoclastic attacks and other forms of historical and personal erasure in my art project, the Anna Pierrepont Series [howardskrill.blogspot.com]. I have represented busts in hall or the absence of busts both before and after the iconoclastic attacks of August 2017. I have long used the hall's sorry state before the removals to interrogate absences and erasure relative to the ideal of 'American greatness' that the hall exists to perpetuate. The cessation of inductions stands as a general reflection of a malaise that arose in American consciousness during the last quarter century before the millennium and that is morphing into open conflict in the twenty first century.

4. <http://nypost.com/2017/08/18/bronx-community-college-removes-confederate-busts/>

5. Heins, Scott – "De Blasio Announces Plan To Take Down NYC's 'Hate Symbols'". *The Gothamist*, AUG 17, 2017, [http://gothamist.com/2017/08/17/bill\\_de\\_blasio\\_hate\\_symbol\\_review.php](http://gothamist.com/2017/08/17/bill_de_blasio_hate_symbol_review.php).



**Fig. 05.** Howard Skrill, *Busts from the Hall of Fame for Great Americans*, Bronx Community College, 24" x 18" oil stick, oil pastel, chalk pastel, graphite and colored pencil on linen panel, ©2017

This malaise originates in the social and economic upheaval that coincided with the hall ceasing to add new busts in the early to mid-1970s, a period that I lived through in New York City as the city and the Bronx, in particular, spiraled into crisis. The president, who also lived through New York City's period of decline in the 1970s, proclaimed that American greatness is currently absent during the 2016 presidential campaign and had this sentiment emblazoned on red baseball caps and banners. The success of his campaign suggests that a plurality of Americans agree with his basic premise. Certainly the president would view the spread of iconoclastic attacks on confederate monuments as adding to America's decline and not indicative of that decline's reversal. The hall was constructed on the site of a British fortification that took advantage of University Heights' strategic location to chase American revolutionary soldiers out of New York City and to maintain a seven year occupation of the city during the entirety of American Revolution. The hall was deliberately built on the site of the British encampment to substitute a celebration of American accomplishment for memories of British occupation.<sup>7</sup>

Kenneth E. Foote (Foote, 1997: 9 et.al.) describes the process by which civilizations approach sites of collective trauma. Foote details the approaches as ranging from sanctification to designation to obliteration. David Harvey recounts the building of the Basilica of Sacré Cœur in Montmartre, Paris on the site of a battle where Paris Communards were defeated by Royalist forces in the spring of 1871 (Harvey, 1979: 362-380). As with Sacré Cœur, sanctification functioning as obliteration is present in the overlaying of a cathedral to American greatness onto a site of a British military encampment [grudgingly designated] that was enacted on the University Heights cliff side in the creation of the hall.

The campus of Bronx Community College was originally built for New York University before being sold to the City University of New York in 1973. At the bottom of the hill rising towards the campus is the Burnside avenue stop of the 4 el train. The D train travels below the once palatial Grand Concourse paralleling the 4 train and stopping at the cavernous Tremont station just east of Burnside Avenue. Down the hillside on Burnside Avenue, in the modern Bronx of hair salons, community centers and Dominican restaurants, crowds wander through stores overflowing with off brand clothing, the latest cell phone handsets, eyeglasses and a photography studio featuring oversized portraits featuring newlyweds and girls in confirmation dresses. Fast food restaurants, a hardware store and automobile repair shops sit in shadows of the el, along with occasional graffiti tags and the shoes of murdered youths draped over power lines. On the campus is supposedly a boulder indicating the British occupation (Boatner, 2006: 217-218).

NYU had built quite a lovely campus for itself on University Heights; low slung buildings constructed with the colored bricks used on the arcade of the Hall of Fame. The campus is inspired, in its design and layout by Roman architecture, with a Pantheon, the Gould Library, as its signature structure. The buildings are clustered around a grass covered quad. Metro North and other trains rumble up a thin set of tracks along the shore of the Harlem River. NYU strapped for cash, in 1973, sold the campus to the City University of New York and inductions into the Hall of Fame for Great Americans came to a screeching halt.

At the turn of the 20th century, as NYU's campus was being constructed, the originators of the hall must have gazed from the heights and believed that this effort to celebrate American greatness was as powerful and as unstoppable as the trains barreling up and down along the river's edge.

6. Gabriel, Trip - <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/25/us/monuments-confederacy-remove-rename.html?mcubz=0&r=0>

7. Dr. Henry Mitchell MacCracken, Chancellor of New York University and originator of The Hall of Fame, is quoted as stating that: "lost to the invaders of 1776, this summit is now retaken by the goodly troop of 'Great Americans', General Washington their leader. They enter into possession of these Heights and are destined to hold them, we trust, forever" an un-cited quotation from the Wikipedia entry on the Hall's origins, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hall\\_of\\_Fame\\_for\\_Great\\_Americans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hall_of_Fame_for_Great_Americans)





Fig. 06• Howard Skrell, Portrait Bust of US Grant from Bronx Community College, 14" x 17" oil pastel on paper, ©2015



Their construction of a Hall for American Fame also reflected their own participation in the unceasing progress of 'American greatness' fostered by an array of giants in American politics, law, science and the arts (including two men, Lee and Jackson, who lead armies against the United States). The trains continue their relentless passage at the bottom of the University Heights palisade in the early days of the 21st century, but idea of propulsive momentum of American progress may well have melted away.

I was an adjunct professor in the art department of Bronx Community College for a decade and drew the busts on many occasions, intimately aware of the hall's ruinous state prior to the removals in a place where over two decades have passed without any additions. Deep shadows from the only light filtering into the hall, natural light, renders many of the likenesses in my pictures barely recognizable. I often needed to wander back and forth to find a head with sufficient light falling upon it to make drawing of the bust. Large diamond shaped grey tiles are inlaid into the ground of the arcade surrounded by red bricks slowly darkening into black. These diamonds declare the organization of the busts into assemblies of "lawyers and judges" and "physicians and surgeons". Paper and leaves blow through the spaces between columns and settle into the dirty corners of the arcade. Squirrels scurry through the hall, scampering up the supporting columns and onto the arcade's roof. A tomb like quiet has settled permanently over the hall broken only by the rumble of trains in the distance. Not a single individual would often wander past as I have sat for hours working on pictures in the hall on a campus utilized by thousands of faculty, staff, students and visitors. A Wikipedia search of the Great Americans currently in the hall generates spreadsheet listing the names of the inductees, occasional photographs of random busts, such that of Thomas Jefferson, the 'classification' of the person's life work as 'politician and statesman' or 'actor' etc., the year of induction and the name of the artist who created the likeness. There is an additional column that is simply designated as 'notes'.

Four names are listed, Louis D. Brandeis (inducted in 1973) and Clara Barton, Luther Burbank and Andrew Carnegie (inducted in 1976), where the notes states simply 'bust unexecuted'. The spreadsheet also implies that a bust exists in the hall for Jackie Robinson (sportsman and statesman). When I returned to the hall to draw the rather spooky absence of the bust of Lee from its empty plinth, I made sure to look for Robinson and can confirm his absence as well.

The sale of the campus to CUNY in 1973 suggests the broader social and political forces that are at play that have significantly impacted the hall, resulting in this celebration of American greatness being discontinued in an era of American greatness' absence (if one is to believe the baseball caps). I do not know whether America is currently great or not, but I do know that a place built in celebration of that greatness has ceased its mission and a broad declaration of the absence of American greatness has followed on the heels of this interruption.

If American Greatness has indeed evaporated, I also know when it started, 1973, the year that the campus that was NYU was sold to the City. Inductions to a hall of American greatness ceased three years later as the borough that the hall is located in was being consumed by flames and collapsing into one of the poorest places in America. That period also witnessed my family's economic collapse and disintegration. In the three years between the most recent unexecuted inductions, 1973-1976, the city teetered on the brink of bankruptcy, strikes of municipal workers were rampant and the crime rate soared. If 1973 marked the greatness that the hall celebrates dissipating and 1976, greatness' cessation then 2017 ushers in a new period that has now witnessed the hall's contraction, a portend perhaps not only of an accelerated decline for a hall celebrating American greatness but for the American project in its entirety, despite the optimistic predictions of decline's reversal emblazoned on the front of baseball caps.

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