Ed Ayers: This is BackStory. I'm Ed Ayers. In 1884, four score and four years after the death of George Washington, the monument of America's first president was finally completed.

Brian Balogh: The great irony is that in order to get that thing built, it was stripped of every possible reference to George Washington.

Ed Ayers: Today on the show, monuments and the controversies that have surrounded them. We hear about the drama surrounding the creation of that iconic obelisk in Washington, and consider the strong feelings triggered by some of America's lesser known memorials.

Kristen Szakos: We always knew that the purpose of those statues was intimidation, make sure you knew your place.

Ed Ayers: We'll also hear the story of the so-called Faithful Slave Memorial in West Virginia, and we'll ask, "How should we deal with such a thing today?"

Elliott C.: We're not happy that they felt the need to put an interpretive plaque next to it. We feel that the stark of monuments stand on their own.

Ed Ayers: Monumental disagreements coming up on BackStory.

Peter Onuf: Major funding for BackStory is provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the University of Virginia, the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, and an anonymous donor.

Ed Ayers: From the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, this is BackStory with the American History Guys.

Brian Balogh: Welcome to the show. I'm Brian Balogh, the 20th century guy, and I'm here with Ed Ayers.

Ed Ayers: Your 19th century guy.

Brian Balogh: And Peter Onuf's with us.

Peter Onuf: The 18th century guy.

Brian Balogh: It's Memorial Day weekend, so we figured it would be a good time to consider the ways Americans have physically memorialized the past. In towns, in cities, all over the country, there are numerous reminders of people and events deemed important enough, at one point or another, to put up a stone or metal tribute to them.

Today, most of us pass by these monuments every day without even noticing them. So it's easy to forget just how controversial a lot of these monuments were when they were first built.

Ed Ayers: While we were putting together this show last Memorial Day, I had one of those moments where my radio life and my scholarly life intercepted. I was giving a talk at the Virginia Festival of the Book, here in our hometown of Charlottesville, and the talk I gave was about how we commemorate the Civil War on its 150th anniversary.

Kristen Szakos: It immediately made me think of the monuments.

Peter Onuf: This is Kristen Szakos. She's a city counsel member in Charlottesville, and the monuments she's talking about are right in the middle of town. One to confederate general Robert E. Lee, and another to Stonewall Jackson. She was at the lunch, and since she grew up in the South, she had an interest in the topic.

Kristen Szakos: So what I asked Ed after the speech was, as an historian, if he felt it was time, on the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, if it was time to start talking about whether those monuments should be our primary visual narrative.

Ed Ayers: Her question was basically whether the city should be talking about tearing down the confederate monuments, or maybe building new statues to balance them out.

Kristen Szakos: As soon as I asked the question, there was like "ah" in the room from the people around me. You would've thought I had asked if it was okay to torture puppies.

Ed Ayers: I replied that I thought it was better to add more history than to subtract from the historical record.

Kristen Szakos: I didn't really think much more of it. I thought, "Well that's interesting, you know, the idea of adding history rather than subtracting history," and I was mulling that over as I left the luncheon, and out in the lobby a newspaper reporter ran up to me and took my arm and said, "I'd like to talk to you about what you said in there." I thought, "Okay." He said, "Do you really mean it? Do you really want to stand by it?" I thought, "Stand by it?"

Peter Onuf: Stand by what?

Kristen Szakos: What was it that I said that was so dangerous that I might now want to stand by it?

Brian Balogh: And he was referring to tearing down those statues?

Kristen Szakos: He was referring to the fact that I asked whether it was time to move them or remove them or balance them out. I never said, "Let's tear them down." He obviously, his reaction turned out to be a little more accurate a public response than the one I had expected.

Brian Balogh: I'd love you to take us through what transpired in the days after you asked that question.

Kristen Szakos: I felt like I had put a stick in the ground and, kind of, ugly stuff bubbled up from it. It was... I immediately started getting emails and phone calls, things like, well, calling me a Yankee and that hurt a lot. But, telling me to go home, telling me that... A lot of the things that they said, I can't repeat here. Somebody called my house and called me an effing whore and to keep my hands off their statues. People said if I wasn't from here, I had no right to talk about the history, and I think that to say that it's an insider or outsider thing, sort of forgets the idea that a lot of people who have been here for generations... In fact, I would argue that most of the people who've been in Charlottesville for generations are African American, and I doubt that they have the same sort of sympathy for this.

Ed Ayers: But have you heard from them?

Kristen Szakos: Oh yes.

Ed Ayers: I'd be curious to hear what you have heard from some of your Charlottesville constituents.

Kristen Szakos: Recently, I've heard quite a few things. Like, "We always knew that the purpose of those statues was intimidation, make sure you knew your place." So, I think a lot of people have, you know, just kind of quietly resented them for years, and are very reluctant to speak out against them because of the firestorm that that can ignite.

Brian Balogh: Kristen Szakos is a city council member in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Peter Onuf: So, it's clear that monuments can be very controversial today, but what's interesting is that they always have been controversial, even the monuments that now we all agree on are important and meaningful to all Americans. Well, they generated a lot of controversy in their time.

Brian Balogh: Take for example a monument that everybody recognizes, the Washington Monument.

Peter Onuf: So, let's take this back to December 15, 1799. George Washington has just died at Mount Vernon, and as the news spreads across the continent, the nation plunges into mourning.

Ed Ayers: There are mock funerals all across the country. And in Philadelphia, cannons fire every half hour, a parade winds through the city led by a riderless horse done up in black and white eagle feathers, and in the eulogy, the famous lines, "First in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen."

Peter Onuf: And people start to say, "Hey, shouldn't we build a memorial to Washington?"

Brian, I wonder if you could get into my century and read this quotation. It's from Light Horse Harry Lee, a revolutionary war hero.

Brian Balogh: "Is there, then, any other mode for perpetuating the memory of such transcendent virtues so strong, so impressive, as the monument we propose." Wow, you guys had a lot of words back then.

Peter Onuf: You bet.

Brian Balogh: You want me to keep going?

Peter Onuf: Yeah.

Brian Balogh: "The grandeur of the pile we wish to raise will impress a sublime awe in all who behold it. It will survive the present generation. It will receive the homage of our children's children."

Peter Onuf: That reading will certainly survive through the generations, but listen. The story gets complicated now, because this is a new country and we don't really know who we are. And there are a lot of disagreements among Americans, and there's even disagreement about how to honor the memory of George Washington.

So think about this situation. It's 1800 and the revolution was not that long ago. If you'd grown up in colonial America, well, what kind of statues would you have seen? Come on, guys.

Brian Balogh: Not many.

Peter Onuf: Yeah, well, you would see a big one in New York, a statue to the other George. That's King George III. And the great thing about our George is that he was not a king. He voluntarily stepped down. So to some people, putting up a monument to him seemed like a step backwards to the days of monarchy.

Ed, let me ask you to represent that side of the debate, that's the republicans. Would you read this?

Ed Ayers: Yeah, please pass that on. Yes.

"Before gentlemen act in this business, let them look to Egypt. There, they will behold precedence and perfusion. Men made gods and statues and monuments and mausolea covering the whole face of the country. But where will they find the virtues or the talents of the men they were meant to commemorate? Now is the time to make a stand against this monument mania."

Peter Onuf: Yeah, well, that's a speech from the anti-maniacal Nathaniel Macon of North Carolina. He's a republican, speaking in Congress in December 1800.

Ed Ayers: White republicans.

Peter Onuf: They are the opposition party to the federalist administrations of George Washington and the current president, that would be John Adams.

Ed Ayers: Oh, okay.

Peter Onuf: Now, republicans are defenders of the revolution against the government. Okay, so they're afraid that the whole experiment republican government is going to be hijacked by these closet monarchists and aristocrats who want to remake America in the [crosstalk 00:09:18].

Ed Ayers: And a statue would be a great way to start doing that.

Peter Onuf: Yeah, it is the slippery slope. And in 1800, the republicans are just not happy because the other guys, that would be the federalists, the supporters of a strong central government, have just proposed an enormous, expensive monument to George Washington. The proposal kicks off a really big debate in Congress, with the federalists saying, "The monument should be a top priority," and the republicans saying, "The idea is dangerous and, hold onto your seats 20th century guy, un-American."

Brian Balogh: The first proposal was for 100 feet high, then as they revised the proposal it grew to 150 feet high.

Kirk Savage: This is Kirk Savage, a professor of Art History at the University of Pittsburgh and author of Monument Wars.

Brian Balogh: So you'd walk up the steps into a fairly dark room that was lit by windows and see a huge sculptural image of George Washington. And that would be your experience from the inside. From the outside, you would see a very large building that was going to out-top, in height, the U.S. Capitol Building.

Peter Onuf: Guys, you can see why this plan would really irritate the republicans. The Washington Monument becomes a proxy war for everything these two groups

disagree on. It becomes an argument over what kind of country this is going to be.

Brian Balogh: In a way, it crystallized the ideological dispute the federalists and the republicans. And the republicans realize that if republicanism meant anything, it meant that they could not support a huge pyramid erected to George Washington. What more authoritarian form could you find than a pyramid?

Peter Onuf: So, this proposal died in Congress in 1801, but private groups took up the cause and raised money to build a monument themselves. Construction started in 1848, but the group ran out of money in the 1850s. Work stopped.

Brian Balogh: And it wasn't until the federal government took over the project in 1876 that it was restarted. And so, an engineer was put in charge of the construction and he really wanted a pristine, abstract obelisk. The people who were opposed to him, and they were most of the art world and most of Congress, they couldn't agree on any alternative. So, he kind of won by default, in a sense. The great irony is that in order to get that thing built, it was stripped of every possible reference to George Washington. In fact, there's no imagery or inscription at all, except on the very, very tippy top of the monument, where there's a small inscription that's 555 feet above the ground.

Peter Onuf: Hard to see.

Brian Balogh: And that only the birds can read. So, a lot of people who visit the Washington Monument today don't even realize that it's a monument to George Washington. They think that maybe it's called the Washington Monument because it's the biggest monument in Washington.

Peter Onuf: So, Kirk, would you say that, inadvertently, the republican iconoclasts merge with the federalist monumentalists and both impulses are felt?

Kirk Savage: Yes. It is an interesting combination of the two, because it's, in a sense, an iconoclastic monument because it did away with all imagery and all didactic content. You know, this is not a monument that tells you anything or that teaches you anything. And that was very much in line with the republicans kind of ideology of every man should figure it out for himself. But at the same time, it was the federalist pyramid proposal blown up to this enormous scale.

Peter Onuf: New heights.

Kirk Savage: It was the tallest building in the world, with the highest passenger elevator in the world.

Peter Onuf: Yeah. So, this was a technical triumph and it told the world something about the United States of America.

Kirk Savage: Yes.

Peter Onuf: It didn't tell the world that the United States of America was a republic, though, did it?

Kirk Savage: No, it didn't at all. And in that sense, it was very different from the republican notion of commemoration back in 1800. And that idea that the monument should only survive as long as it lives in the feeling of citizens, that the true memory is really within peoples hearts, and not in a pile of masonry. And so, in a way, the Washington Monument, as it's finally finished, is nothing but a pile of masonry.

Peter Onuf: That was Kirk Savage, professor of Art History at the University of Pittsburgh. His book is called Monument Wars.

Ed Ayers: We're going to take a short break. When we come back, we'll talk about a controversial memorial to slaves, slaves who were supposedly faithful to their owners.

Brian Balogh: You're listening to BackStory. We'll be right back.

Peter Onuf: Welcome back to BackStory. I'm Peter Onuf, 18th century guy. And I got 19th century guy, Ed Ayers, with me today.

Ed Ayers: Hey, Peter.

Peter Onuf: And Brian Balogh, 20th century guy.

Brian Balogh: That would be me.

Ed Ayers: Today on our show, the history of memorials and monuments.

So, Brian, this is Ed Ayers, speaking on behalf of the 19th century. I have to apologize to you. We're kind of leaking into your century [crosstalk 00:14:24] on this.

Peter Onuf: I think flooding is the right word here.

Ed Ayers: Well, you know. I have to admit, you're right. We were pretty present there because in the 1890s, the first decade of the 20th century, the veterans in both the union and the confederacy were dying off. And their sons and daughters noticed that they had better acknowledge their enormous sacrifices, and began

a kind of mania, putting up monuments in towns and cities and villages all across the countries. And even into the 1930s, people were still trying to nail down all the meanings of this complicated Civil War by memorializing it. And one place where the materialization of the Civil War was played out was at one of the places where the Civil War, in some ways. Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, where John Brown led his famous raid in 1859, a band of white and black abolitionists trying to inspire slave rebellion. Today, there are two monuments there. One is a six foot tall obelisk. It kind of looks like a miniature Washington Monument. And that monument marks the original location of the old federal armory that was so important in John Brown's raid.

Today, across the street, maybe 100 feet away, up against the side of a large brick building, is another memorial. And that one looks like a big tombstone, frankly, about the size of a refrigerator.

Todd Bolton: It's a large, granite inscribed monument.

Ed Ayers: This is Todd Bolton. He works for the National Park Service at Harpers Ferry. Two of our producers, Eric Mennel and Nell Boeschenstein, talked to him when they visited the town. And the monument he's describing was dedicated in 1931 in honor of the first person killed in John Brown's raid, a man by the name of Hayward Sheppard.

Todd Bolton: There's no images on it, no bronze. It's text and-

Eric Mennel: Say it's like, what, 6'4" maybe? It's about as tall as you are.

Todd Bolton: It's in good shape, it really is. It's-

Eric Mennel: For a hunk of rock, yeah.

Todd Bolton: A hunk of rock, it's in pretty good shape.

Ed Ayers: The interesting thing about Hayward Sheppard isn't just that he was the first person killed by Brown and his raiders. It's that Sheppard was African American, a free black man. A fact that has made this memorial more than a little problematic over the years. Eric and Nell tell the story.

Eric Mennel: Hayward Sheppard worked as a porter for the B&O Railroad in Harpers Ferry. He was on duty the night of October 19, 1859, the night of John Brown's raid. Aware of a commotion outside, Sheppard took his lantern and walked down to the train. Brown and company were on their way into town. It was dark and Sheppard was in their path. Either Brown himself, or one of his men, shot Sheppard, leaving him badly injured. He died shortly after.

Nell B.: Now, Hayward Sheppard's name might have been forgotten, had it not been for the efforts of two groups: the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of Confederate Veterans, the UDC and the SCV. They're run by the descendants of confederate soldiers, and their job is to preserve confederate heritage. Memorials, flags, archives, that kind of stuff. In 1931, the local chapters of the UDC and the SCV erected a memorial to Hayward Sheppard in Harpers Ferry. They placed it directly across the street from the John Brown obelisk. In one long sentence, the memorial reads, "This boulder is set up by the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy as a memorial to Hayward Sheppard, exemplifying the character and faithfulness of thousands of Negroes who, under many temptations throughout the subsequent years of war, so conducted themselves that no stain was left upon a record, which is the peculiar heritage of the American people, and an everlasting tribute to the best in both races."

Eric Mennel: Okay, so to translate that from monument speak, "We the SCV and the UDC would like to honor Hayward Sheppard and all the other black people in the south who were good and faithful to their white superiors. Never rebelling against them or the status quo." The group had a nickname for this monument, the Faithful Slave Memorial.

Nell B.: The Faithful Slave was an idea confederate heritage groups had been pushing for years. The logic was, since most slaves didn't rebel, they must have been happy. And if they were happy, it's because their masters treated them well. Slaves were faithful because they knew slavery was better than any other situation available to them.

Eric Mennel: Of course, Hayward Sheppard wasn't a slave. So even if there were such a thing as a faithful slave, Sheppard wouldn't have fit the bill. But that was no matter. The monument was built and dedicated with plenty of fanfare and plenty of controversy. W.E.B Du Bois called the dedication a quote, "pro-slavery celebration."

For 40 years, the monument stood undisturbed. During that time, the National Park Service acquired a bunch of the land and artifacts in Harpers Ferry, including the Hayward Sheppard Memorial and all the problems attached to it.

Nell B.: Then, in the 1970s, the Park Service began restoring some of the old buildings in town. In order to keep the memorial from being damaged, they put it away in a maintenance yard where it stayed for five years. When they put it back in its original location, they made one notable change.

Elliott C.: It was covered with a wooden box.

Eric Mennel: This is Elliott Cummings, former commander of the Sons of Confederate Veterans in the nearby Maryland divisions. Remember, the SCV is one of the

two groups who originally funded the memorial. So needless to say, they were upset when they found out it had been covered. Todd Bolton, the Park Service employee, says he wasn't at the top level of memorial discussions, but he had a sense of why certain decisions were being made.

Todd Bolton: My understanding was that there had been, the park had had some threats of violence or defacing of the monument, so it stayed in storage for some years.

Nell B.: By in storage, you mean covered or you-

Todd Bolton: Covered, there was a shell over it.

Elliott C.: The wooden box was painted brown to make it blend in with the trash can covers.

Eric Mennel: Again, Elliott Cummings.

Elliott C.: So, it's concerning that a legitimate monument at a National Park Service would be covered up in that manner. We kind of worked from there.

Eric Mennel: In the early 90s, Cummings, the Sons of Confederate Veterans member, began a letter writing campaign to get the box removed.

Elliott C.: I wrote to Bruce Babbitt who, at this time, was Secretary of the Interior under Bill Clinton. I wrote to Senator Byrd, who was the senior senator from West Virginia, where Harpers Ferry's located.

Nell B.: In 1995, enough political pressure mounted to force the Park Service to uncover the memorial, but they added a little something of their own. About ten feet to the right of the memorial is a small, interpretive plaque explaining who Hayward Sheppard was and what the 1931 controversy was all about. It also offers a quote from W.E.B. Du Bois. Quote, "Here, John Brown aimed at human history, a blow that woke a guilty nation. With him fought seven slaves and sons of slaves." The quote goes on about John Brown, but mentions neither Hayward Sheppard nor the idea of the faithful slave.

Jim Tolbert: That other marker should have been more, you know, expansive, I think. Because it really doesn't say anything, it just talks about W.E.B. Du Bois. That's all it does.

Nell B.: This is Jim Tolbert, former president of the West Virginia NAACP. He said that he, and other members of the NAACP, are upset that the plaque doesn't adequately debunk the faithful slave narrative. Or, as he puts it...

Jim Tolbert: That is clearly a lie, and I'll just keep on calling it a lie. It's a lie.

Eric Mennel: And while the NAACP thought the plaque said too little, the Sons of Confederate Veterans were unhappy it was there at all.

Elliott C.: We're not happy that they felt the need to put an interpretive plaque next to it. We feel that the stark of monuments stand on their own.

Todd Bolton: That is our job. Our job is not to tell you to come here and this is what we want you to think about this particular part of history. We don't do that. Our job is to present the history, to show balanced perspectives, and allow you as an individual to, based on that unbiased information, to walk away with your own conclusions.

Eric Mennel: Today, the NAACP is still pretty upset about the whole situation, but there's only so much they can do. The confederate heritage groups would get rid of the plaque in a heartbeat, but they've more or less moved on. The Park Service maintains that the memorial is an historical artifact entrusted to the U.S. Government, and they'll continue to maintain it as such.

Nell B.: The Hayward Sheppard memorial may have just been a monument to a particular vision of the South, but it does point to something else. Over the past 150 years, there has been little effort to memorialize slavery in a way that reflects the true scale of the experience and it's reverberations. What's clear is that slavery can't be stored in a maintenance yard or covered up with a plywood box. And one has to wonder if there will ever be an interpretive plaque big enough to make sense of it all.

Ed Ayers: That's Nell Boeschenstein and Eric Mennel. They've posted some pictures of the Hayward Sheppard Memorial, as well as some background about its origins, at BackStoryRadio.org.

Peter Onuf: On each episode of BackStory, we take a little time to make contact with the outside world. All week, listeners have been sending us their questions online, and we called a few people to talk history.

Guys, we got a call from Cupertino, California. Kristen, what do you got?

Kristen: Well, I've got a question about dealing with race issues and monuments.

Peter Onuf: Mm-hmm (affirmative), right.

Kristen: I was a public historian in San Jose, California at a time when a monument was being placed in the city, that honored the raising of the American flag during the Mexican American War. And the Mexican American community in San Jose vigorously opposed the monument because they saw that event as a moment of conquest. The people who commissioned the monument, which was the city of

San Jose, saw the event as a moment of heroism. The outcome of the event was that the city of San Jose decided to place three other monuments so that everyone, ostensibly, in the city would have their own monument. But what's interesting is that when they finally did place the flag raising monument after 10 years of negotiations and the creation of these other monuments, the plaque that's on that monument only talks about the controversy over the monument. It doesn't really say what event is being memorialized. It talks about all of the problems that came about because of the attempt to memorialize the event.

Brian Balogh: I don't know, guys. What percentage of energy that goes into monuments... I want a specific number. What percentage of the energy that goes into monuments would you say is attributable to the zeitgeist of the times that those monuments are conceived and they're actually built?

Ed Ayers: The answer to your question, Brian, would be 82%.

Brian Balogh: What do you say, Kristen? You actually know something about this.

Kristen: I would say it's closer to 90%.

Ed Ayers: Let's call it 87, all right?

But you know, it does strike me that it's almost become scripted, that the controversy is built in now. And it seems that there is a part of the American population that equates monumental with celebratory. And there are other people who equate monumental with remembrance. And I think that what you're seeing here is that people are trying to either occlude, to some ways, a moment of conquest to get to the end of the story, which is this great nation we live in, or to make sure we remember that it was not always so, that there was a moment of struggle.

Peter Onuf: I think you're right about the zeitgeists of the times. And this is just not exactly the time to celebrate the Mexican War. Had the monument gone up in the 19th century, even in the early 20th century when it certainly would not have been so controversial, then it would be part of the monumental landscape and nobody's going to do anything to it, aside from the pigeons. I think people invest a lot of significance in building a new monument, because it is a statement about who's got the power to shape the historical landscape, the monumental landscape, now.

Ed Ayers: The thing is that that's always been the case, that the monuments reflect who has the political power. The difference is that the democracy has advanced enough, and means of expression have advanced enough, that the people who are opposed to it have a chance to say something. As somebody who lives in the middle of lots of confederate monuments, we can imagine that they were never welcomed by the African Americans, among whom they were positioned. And

they were always there for a political purpose, it just wasn't recognized as such by the white people who controlled all political power.

Peter Onuf: You're living in an interesting times and in an interesting place, Kristen. And thanks for your report.

Kristen: Thank you so much for having me.

Ed Ayers: Thanks a lot. Bye.

Brian Balogh: Bye.

Peter Onuf: Bye bye.

Kristen: Bye.

Peter Onuf: Rally around fellow history guys, we have a call from our nation's capital, and it is Esther. Esther, welcome to BackStory.

Esther: Well thank you, I'm happy to be here.

Peter Onuf: Well, it's great to have you. We're talking about memorials and monuments and the way we think about the past.

Esther: Okay.

Peter Onuf: What do you have for us?

Esther: As a person who lives in Washington D.C. I'm in a city that is a washing monuments. And many of them actually memorialize people or events that have faded almost entirely from contemporary consciousness, so I have-

Ed Ayers: And they're right in the middle of a traffic circle.

Esther: You bet. So I have kind of a two-part question.

Brian Balogh: We'll have to charge you extra for that.

Esther: I'll say them extra fast.

Peter Onuf: Okay.

Esther: What are the forces that come together that result in a monument or a memorial being established, first of all? And second, were there different values

that were being reflected in the choices made in earlier times, about what figures or events actually were worthy of memorializing?

Peter Onuf: Right. The answer to question number two is yes. We'll move on to question number one. What are the forces that converge to produce these monuments in our cityscape. And let's start with you, Ed.

Ed Ayers: Okay. I didn't see that coming, but I'm happy to go at it. I think that you have to have what is perceived to be a consensus that something is worth memorializing, at least among the people who matter. People want to seize the moment when something seems in danger of being forgotten, you know? It's ironic. It has to be within living memory, I believe, but there's a sense that there are people coming up or people around us who don't understand the meaning of this.

Peter Onuf: Right.

Ed Ayers: Does that make sense Esther?

Esther: You bet. It makes perfect sense.

Ed Ayers: I wonder if we could get Esther to ask her question again, the second part, because I don't-

Esther: The second part?

Ed Ayers: Yeah.

Esther: The second part of my question was were there... You know, again, I'm thinking of these men on horses. Were there different values that were being reflected in the choices made in earlier times about what figures or events were worthy of memorializing?

Brian Balogh: You mean as opposed to today?

Esther: Yes, exactly. As opposed to today.

Peter Onuf: In the immediate wake of George Washington's death, there was a lot of controversy about whether there should be a Washington Monument, what form it should take. And there were real scruples about representing, well, a man on horseback. Because was this a military regime, was it founded by a great man like Andrew Jackson? The great Jackson statue in New Orleans marked a significant turn in American history, because it was as if we had our own Napoleon. And this was looking back at a European tradition.

Ed Ayers: Whereas Washington will be represented by a chased obelisk, with no human likeness on it at all. And matter of fact, we will raise money from all over the country and build this monument that is from the ancient world but symbolizes the raise of the sun.

Peter Onuf: I'll give you another Washington though, Ed, and it's right here in Virginia. It's the Washington in Richmond, built in 1858. And this is... He got back up on his horse and he's surrounded by a bunch of militant Virginians, ready to go off to war, the Civil War.

Ed Ayers: As it turns out, of course, that is the very place, just a few years later, where Jefferson Davis assumed the presidency of the confederacy. In three years you go from the monumental representation of George Washington to that becoming the symbol of the confederacy.

Well I tell you, Esther, you've opened a can of [crosstalk 00:32:35] monuments.

Brian Balogh: You've opened a revolving door.

Peter Onuf: Well, Esther, you didn't realize that you had asked three or four questions, and so you...

Esther: Right, exactly. And apparently I'm going to have to pay another visit.

Peter Onuf: You will indeed. Thanks so much for calling, Esther.

Esther: Thank you.

Ed Ayers: Bye bye.

Peter Onuf: Bye bye.

Esther: Bye bye.

Ed Ayers: We're going to take a short break. When we come back, it's time to blow up some mountains.

Brian Balogh: We'll be back in a minute with more BackStory.

Peter Onuf: Welcome back to BackStory. I'm Peter Onuf, 18th century guy, here with Ed Ayers.

Ed Ayers: Your 19th century guy.

Peter Onuf: And Brian Balogh.

Brian Balogh: I'm your 20th century guy. Today on our show, we're doing memorials, their histories, and their controversies. Guys, let's take a trip out west to the black hills of South Dakota. We are going to Mount Rushmore.

Peter Onuf: Hey, I was there in 1953.

Ed Ayers: You know what? And I was there in 1999 and it looked exactly the same.

Peter Onuf: Wow, same four guys up there?

Ed Ayers: Yeah.

Brian Balogh: So they hadn't added anybody?

Peter Onuf: Now can you remember which ones?

Ed Ayers: Yeah, there are four guys. Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Teddy Roosevelt.

Peter Onuf: Two Virginians.

Ed Ayers: They were literally blown into existence between 1927 and 1941. Their heads, now, are 60 feet tall and they are 5,000 feet above sea level. Rushmore's sculptor was a pretty prolific guy, and his name, Gutzon Borglom.

Brian Balogh: Are you saying that backwards?

Ed Ayers: Gutzon Borglom was sort of a celebrity sculptor. Borglom developed a lot of the techniques that he would use eventually at Mount Rushmore at another iconic work of his, Stone Mountain, the confederate monument in Atlanta.

Peter Onuf: Yeah, a monument of blowing up the union, right?

Ed Ayers: Yes, he liked blowing things up. No doubt. Mount Rushmore was going to be his way of putting it all back together, Peter. It was going to be his grand opus to American territorial expansion.

The mountain was what's a sacred part of the Lakota Sioux tribal land, but the U.S. Government found some gold there and, I think you know the rest of that story. That was the cliff notes version, and we all know you can't get more than a B+ with cliff notes.

Peter Onuf: You did that well?

Ed Ayers: We are an A+ show, and to get an A+ on this one, you've really got to go to the visitor's center at the base of Mount Rushmore. And better yet, go into that

darkened auditorium and watch the video that they show you about the monument, the orientation video.

Now, Mount Rushmore's gone through three of these orientation videos. The first one in 1965, the next in '73, and the one that's currently running was made in 1986.

Peter Onuf: How about the one that was running in 1953?

Ed Ayers: That was a filmstrip, Peter.

Peter Onuf: That's why I don't remember those videos.

Ed Ayers: Well, kind of like the monuments that we've been talking about, these videos really tell you more about the times that they were made in than about the monuments themselves. A professor who noticed this was Teresa Bergman. She's a professor at the University of the Pacific, and she walked me through all three videos starting with the first one made in 1965.

Speaker 15: Let us place there, carved high, as close to the heavens as we can.

Teresa Bergman: So this first film spends, from my point of view, an inordinate amount of time explaining who Gutzon Borglom is. And almost every other shot, you see another shot of Borglom somehow, even during the blasting and the chiseling, he's in almost every shot.

Speaker 15: But Borglom says... Gutzon Borglom... Borglom had already begun to frame his... Borglom has come to South Dakota... When Gutzon Borglom returned to Mount Rushmore in 1925...

Teresa Bergman: I think my favorite part of this film is actually the last shot, because we have this cross fade of Gutzon Borglom with a fedora at an angle, of course. And it's cross faded... His image is above Mount Rushmore. So there is no question that the main message of this film is that Mount Rushmore is Gutzon Borglom.

Ed Ayers: Yeah. Yeah, was there a movement to put his head there as the fifth? Probably not.

Why do you think they made this kind of film in 1965 and what does the film say about that period in American history?

Teresa Bergman: Well, that's a really good question. In '65 in the U.S. there was a lot of contention. There was civil disobedience, demonstrations, and beginnings of problems with Vietnam, Civil Rights Movement, and the government itself is not to be trusted. So, what you have going on in this first film is a very, I think,

conscious decision not to interpret Rushmore the way Borglom would have interpreted it, in terms of manifest destiny, U.S. expansionism and imperialism, but let's just look at this person in particular and who he was and what he did, and not focus of the meaning so much. Let's focus on him.

Well, we're in 1973 now.

Ed Ayers: Okay. Now, if 1965 witnessed a certain amount of division, 1973 all hell was breaking loose.

Teresa Bergman: Yep. So, what we get, the way the whole dissonance and the civil disobedience and not such civil disobedience, is incorporated in the explanation of the choice of each of the presidents. They're all defined in how they survived discourt, internal discourt in the nation.

Ed Ayers: Very interesting.

Speaker 17: Washington tried to focus his country's attention on the awesome problems of internal harmony... Of a man who was president, held our country together through a period which nearly melted the foundations of our republic, Abraham Lincoln.

Ed Ayers: What did the public say to all this? How was this second film received?

Teresa Bergman: Most of the documents that I read in doing my research is it wasn't received really well by the National Park Service. I didn't see anything from the public, but a lot of the memos and the letters that people wrote to each other were responding to complaints that it wasn't inspirational or uplifting the way the previous film was.

The third film, and it's the film that's still showing, came out in 1986 and the narrator is Tom Brokaw, and it's been received really well. And I think that's mostly evidenced by it's still showing after all these years with no changes whatsoever. I mean, this one is much more in the direction of uplifting and bringing back some previous things, celebrating Borglom again and imperialism comes back. And it moved completely away from defining who these presidents were, the way it was in the '73 film, to let's just focus on how this thing got carved.

Ed Ayers: And it got carved with lots of dynamite.

Teresa Bergman: Lots of dynamite. One of the most popular exhibits inside the visitor's center, it's a simulation of... You can actually make dynamite blow up. You have a plunger and you push it down and there's a video screen, and those images that

you see in the documentary, in the orientation film of Rushmore blowing up, those are shown as you push down.

Ed Ayers: Well, you've referred to the historical context of the first two films, so close the loop. What's going on? Why would this be emphasized?

Teresa Bergman: Well, it's 1986 when this film comes out, and it takes such a different tact that the '73 film, because they weren't really pleased with that film. And one of the ways to not get involved in the politics and move away from that, which had happened in the second film, is look at how it was made. And let's look at workers and let's focus on, not on the politics, not on the meaning, let's just be celebratory and the way we can do this without being too political is to look at the people who worked on it. And not even focus on Borglom too much.

Speaker 18: It is a monument no less to the men who, working together, transformed a lofty dream into a colossal reality. A work of art for the ages.

Teresa Bergman: I have a very mixed experience when I go to Mount Rushmore. It's awe-inspiring. I mean, you can't help but be awestruck. And it is so massive. But at the same time, I'm very perplexed that we would do this to a mountain in the black hills, and that it's still contested who owns the black hills. And none of that is even represented on the site at all. I feel like a big part of the history, like anything before Borglom, before the carvings, very little about that is there.

Brian Balogh: Teresa Bergman is a professor at University of the Pacific. She has a book coming out about these videos, and the videos at a bunch of other monuments, called Exhibiting Patriotism: Creating and Contesting Interpretations of American Historic Sites.

Ed Ayers: If you're just tuning in, this is BackStory, and we're talking about memorials.

Peter Onuf: As we're finishing up this show, we got a message from a listener who wanted to talk about a slightly different type of memorial than the ones we've been talking about today. Vicky's from Madison, Wisconsin. Vicky, what do you have for us?

Vicky: Well, I wanted to tell you the story about how Facebook and social media have changed the way I live in community and live with the memories of the people who have passed. My dad passed away in 2003, when Facebook was still a gleam in Mark Zuckerberg's eyes. My dad was a really popular dad among my high school friends. He was the fun dad and the dad who actually talked to teenagers like they were people.

Ed Ayers: Wow.

Peter Onuf: Whoa, good for him.

Vicky: And I joined Facebook in 2007 and reconnected with a lot of my old buddies. And when the anniversary of his passing rolled around, I posted some notes about my dad on my Facebook profile. I posted the eulogy that I presented at his funeral, and the obituary that my brother and I had written for him, and some pictures of him as a child and as an adult. And it was... What made it wonderful for me was that it reconnected me with my high school friends, and it also gave my new friends some sense of my own history and who I came from and where I came from and how I came to be the person that I am. What do you think of the idea of using social media as a new kind of gathering place for memorials, pulling together our sense of our family histories, and also kind of a virtual... I don't know how to say it, a virtual graveyard that we go back and visit every once in a while.

Ed Ayers: Vicky, this is Ed. That's a very interesting question, and I have what may seem like a strange answer. This is a recovery of a much older tradition, I think, that reached its peak in Victorian America in the 19th century, and that we worked very hard to forget in the 20th century. They dwelt on the memory of people they'd lost that they loved, but they kind of care and openness that struck subsequent generations as a little strange. You know, so you can see framed memorials made of people's hair that had been cut and then woven into rosettes or into, you know, other kinds of things that you would hang on the wall. People would make all of these elaborate scrapbooks of all the things that came in at the time of a funeral.

Brian, I'm going to sort of kick it to you a little bit, because it strikes me that somehow in the early 20th century, this tradition came to seem inappropriate and certainly was lost, and that the idea of a funeral came to be to get rid of death as quickly as possible and then to move on. Am I wrong about thinking that?

Brian Balogh: No, I think you're right, Ed. And unfortunately, I think we have kind of science to blame for this. We have the medical profession to blame for this, and we have this notion of the sanitized death to blame for this. And most of all, a kind of specialization of life where we develop professional undertakers and bodies were taken away if I'm not wrong. People died in their homes in your century and there was a real presence of the body. Of course that's true of Peter's period as well.

Peter Onuf: Well, I mean the presence of the lost one, the dead person, was the basis, you might say, of spiritualism in the 19th century. That is, communicating across that barrier didn't seem all that far when the genius of the house, the people who had lived there, there was a sense of the eminence or the presence of the past in the 19th century that you certainly didn't have, don't have in the 20th and 21st.

Ed Ayers: As the person who took us immediately back to the pre-internet era to talk about Vicky's direct question about the effect of the internet, I feel a responsibility to bring us back. It is interesting what otherwise would have been folded away quietly, maybe shared on a birthday or a holiday with just a few people. Now we understand that those same reminders speak to a far larger group of people than we might have thought. It strikes me as that it seems less lonely now, with the sharing of social media. Am I right Vicky? I thought I heard in your voice a certain sense of comfort.

Vicky: Yes, and one of the things that you made me think of is, I have a friend who passed away a couple of years ago and his Facebook profile was never taken down by his family. And when his birthday rolls around, everybody who was on his friend list gets an announcement. Today is such and so's birthday. And I go to his page and I see that people have come to his page and wished him a happy birthday in Heaven, and talk about the things that they remember about him. And it's almost like going and laying flowers on the grave on the anniversary, which Facebook reminds us of. But it also keeps us removed, because we don't actually have to deal with it in a physical way.

Peter Onuf: What it reminds me... And I'm going to sound like Ed again, maybe it's just because the 19th century is the most important century, but I'm thinking of the proliferation of genealogies. That county histories, local histories, but most importantly, genealogies in the 19th century. It was the ultimate textual, printed form of this keeping family memories alive. And I think what you've got is kind of a living mega genealogy in the internet, at least potentially.

Ed Ayers: It's interesting, as Peter was suggesting, that genealogy is perhaps the most popular activity of legitimate nature on the internet. It's one of the first things that people have done, is to use this both for the purposes that Vicky is saying, but also to connect with people who were your ancestors long ago. So, it's fascinating. Apparently this longing for personal memorialization, not so much a quest for individual immortality, but to understand where we fit, may I say it, into the flow of history.

Peter Onuf: Yeah.

Ed Ayers: Seems to be enabled now, in a way, that it simply wasn't before.

Peter Onuf: Vicky, terrific call. Thank you for calling.

Vicky: Thank you so much for taking my call.

Brian Balogh: That's going to do it for this week. Tell us about the memorials in your town at BackStoryRadio.org. There you'll find this show and all of our past episodes available for free. You can also look ahead to upcoming shows and leave your questions about those topics. That's at BackStoryRadio.org.

Ed Ayers: Today's episode of BackStory was produced by Jessica [Bretson 00:50:53], Eric Mennel, and Anna [Pinkert 00:50:55], with help from Nell Boeschenstein and Frank [Sirello 00:50:58]. Jamal Millner is our technical director, and Tony Field is our senior producer. BackStory's executive producer is Andrew [Windom 00:51:07].

Brian Balogh: Special thanks today to George Ruthford, Paul Shackle, and [Stu 00:51:12] and Polly [Warton 00:51:13].

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Speaker 20: Peter Onuf and Brian Balogh are professors in the University of Virginia's Corcoran Department of History. Ed Ayers is president and professor of history at the University of Richmond. BackStory was created by Andrew Windom for the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities.