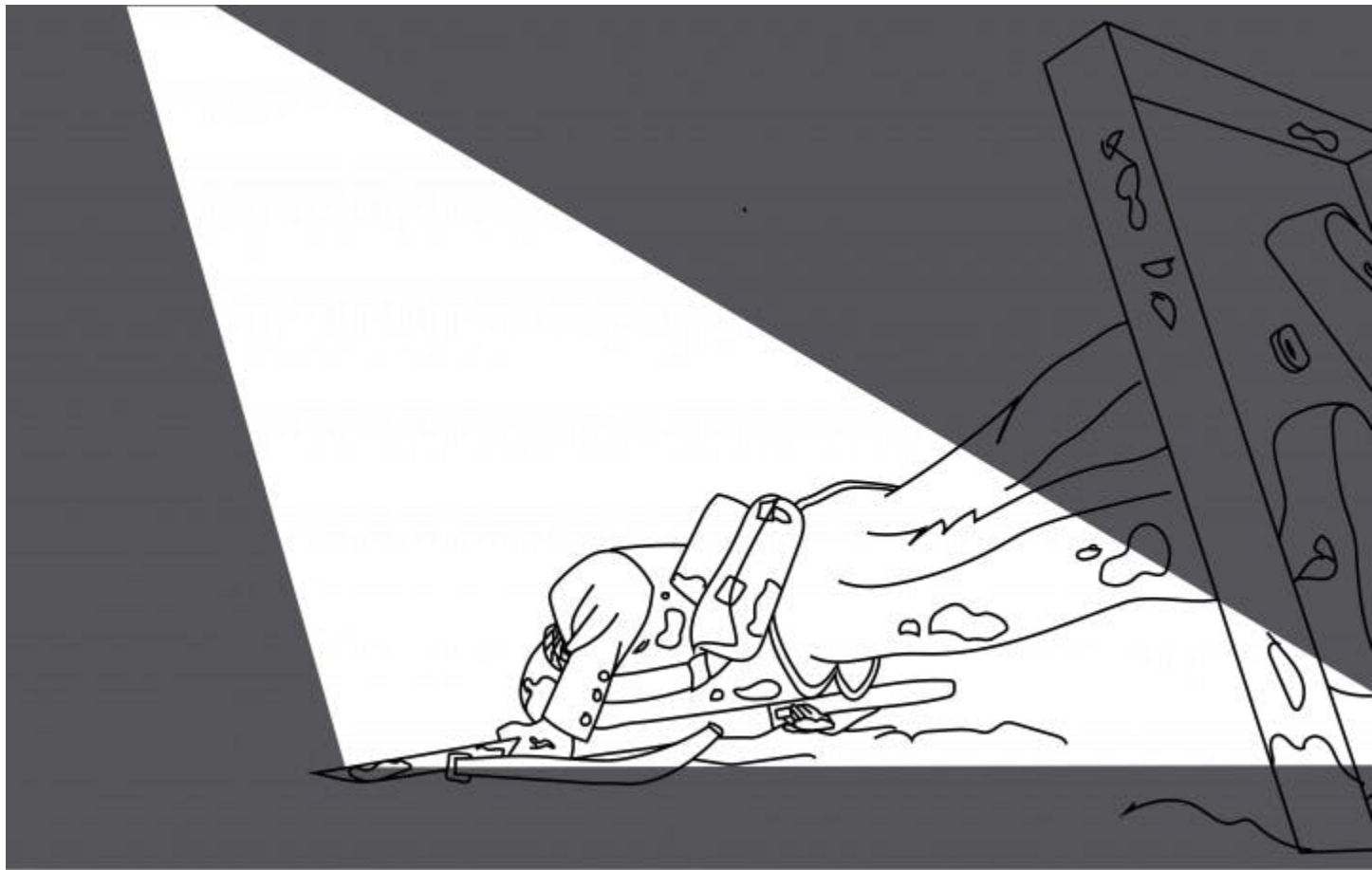


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Rise and fall: The 110 year history of UNC's Confederate monument, Silent Sam

Although torn down, political conversations keep the statue alive



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Graphic depiction of Silent Sam's toppling in August 2018. Silent Sam was the Confederate statue that stood on the northern edge of UNC's campus for over 100 years.

BY [Preston Lennon](#)

Clarification: This article has been updated to include attributions to information derived from the After Action report. The Daily Tar Heel apologizes for this error.

The bronze, gun-wielding statue of a nameless Confederate Tar Heel guarded the northern edge of campus for over 100 years. Months have passed since the monument was torn down on the rainy night before 2018 FDOC, and it awaits its fate in a secure and secret location.

The Civil War monument known as Silent Sam has forced uncomfortable and unprecedented questions about Confederate culture onto the politics of UNC and the state of North Carolina. Emblematic of a wide-scale reevaluation of the historical interplay between the American South and race, Silent Sam is seen by some as an out-of-place reminder of a bygone era, while others argue that by not resurrecting the statue after its illegal destruction, UNC subverted the rule of law.

Where it stands now:

Silent Sam has been stored in a secret location since August 2018. UNC's Board of Trustees proposed creating a secured museum on South Campus to house the statue, but leadership at the state level shot down the idea. Currently, its fate is in the hands of the UNC system Board of Governors, who have [decided to indefinitely postpone making a decision regarding the statue's future](#).

This story draws largely from, and quotes, the [Silent Sam Monument After Action Assessment Report](#), commissioned by the UNC System Board of Governors.

It wasn't always complicated.

In 1908, the North Carolina chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy petitioned the governing body of the University — the Board of Trustees — to erect a monument “to commemorate the more than 300 students serving as Confederate soldiers who perished in the Civil War.”

Silent Sam was completed in 1913, and spent the first half of the twentieth century mostly undisturbed and unquestioned.

In 1968, the statue was tagged with graffiti and painted in the aftermath of Martin Luther King's assassination. Pro-monument students decorated the statue with Confederate flags and cleaned Silent Sam off. When asked to remove the flags, they did so.

In 1973, the Black Student Movement marched in protest of the death of James Cates — a black student killed by a motorcycle gang in the Pit. In 1991, a Gulf War “Support the Troops” rally was held on campus. Both events started at the statue's base.

Many years later in 2011, a UNC graduate student inspired new fervor by unearthing the statue's 1913 commencement speech in a [DTH letter to the editor](#).

The speech, delivered by UNC Trustee Julian Carr, featured his account of “horsewhipp[ing] a negro wench until her skirts hung in shreds,” — punishment for insulting a white woman on Franklin Street — cementing in some peoples' minds an unavoidable link between the statue and a racist history.

This lost chapter prompted a renewed discussion on contextualizing the University's history. Also in 2011, the community organization "The Real Silent Sam" is established “to create honest public dialogue and provoke critical thought surrounding the monuments and buildings in Chapel Hill and Carrboro." They held a demonstration at the statue in September, where they unveiled a mock plaque that detailed Silent Sam's history.

The grassroots campaign to evaluate UNC's history scored a win four years later, when after much discussion, [the BOT agreed to change the name of Saunders Hall to Carolina Hall](#).

William Saunders was a BOT member in the late 1800s, and the chief organizer of the Ku Klux Klan in North Carolina, originally cited as a reason to honor him with a namesake building.

Alongside the decision to rename the building, the BOT instituted a 16-year freeze on renaming any additional campus structures.

Two months later in June, Dylan Roof, a white man with professed intentions of starting a race war killed nine people at a historic black church in Charleston, South Carolina. Calls for the statue's removal heated up. Aware of simmering tensions, the Republican powers in North Carolina, helmed by former Gov. Pat McCrory, passed Senate Bill 22, which made it illegal to remove objects of remembrance from public property.

Senate Bill 22 is now at the heart of the question: Will Silent Sam return?

Pro-statue politicians say yes — the statue’s removal was illegal, and the law allocates 90 days for an illegally-removed monument to be returned to its original position; by failing to do so, UNC has broken the law.

Anti-statue advocates say it shouldn’t — the law includes a loophole for a safety concern that would justify the removal of a monument, and continuing to support Silent Sam’s presence would constitute a grave and immediate safety issue for the University. The opposition then argues that the type of safety concern mentioned in the law pertains to a failure of infrastructure rather than a threat of violence.

There was backlash on campus in response to the state's establishment of a pro-statue outlook. The statue was vandalized multiple times in the next few months. In August, protestors spray painted “Who is Sandra Bland?” on its pedestal, referencing the case of the woman who was found hung in a Texas jail after a physical, and many say racist, traffic stop ended in an arrest.

Simmering anger culminated in Oct. 2015, in what is widely described as the first Silent Sam gathering in recent history that required a significant police presence. UNC Police were alerted two pro-monument groups had made plans to rally on campus in support of Silent Sam at 2:00 P.M. on Oct. 25.

In what would become the model for police action at future protests, bike racks were organized around the statue as a barricade, and mobile field forces from other law enforcement agencies were on standby in a nearby building if things got violent.

Although police expected the event to feature mostly pro-monument attendees, only 100 sympathizers showed up. They were outnumbered by the nearly 300 counter-protestors who came to advocate for the statue’s removal. University Police reported minor altercations between the two sides, police action at the protest was considered a success.

The struggle plateaued for a few years. Cameras went up around 2015 that allowed police to stream footage of McCorkle place 24/7 from the 911 dispatch center.

But in Aug 2017, a protest for a different Confederate monument, taking place at a different Southern college town, ended in death. On that day, a white supremacist drove a 2010 Dodge Challenger into a crowd of people protesting a Robert E. Lee statue on display in a Charlottesville, V.A. park. He killed one person and injured 35.

The FDOC 2017 Protest

Reverberations from the attack spread throughout the country. In the following days, Durham protestors toppled a Confederate soldier statue outside the courthouse, and others vandalized a Robert E. Lee statue in the Duke University Chapel, which was then removed by Duke under pressure. The University of Texas at Austin followed suit, removing three Confederate monuments in the middle of the night, 10 days before their classes began.

Five days after the Charlottesville incident, Chapel Hill Mayor Pam Hemminger sent a letter to Chancellor Folt, asking her to have “UNC petition the North Carolina Historical Commission to have the statue of Silent Sam removed immediately from its current location on campus and placed in storage.”

Meanwhile, UNC Police gathered intelligence about a protest planned for the night of FDOC 2017 on Aug. 22. It was being promoted with flyers around campus and social media posts — “The first day of Silent Sam’s last semester,” some flyers read.

UNC Chapel Hill Police Chief Jeff McCracken wrote Chancellor Folt a letter as the University prepared for the start of class.

“The fact that UNC Chapel Hill is the only campus in the UNC System that has a Civil War monument on its property places our community in a uniquely dangerous situation,” he said in the letter. “Any support that you can garner to help mitigate this impending threat will be greatly appreciated.”

“I have the very real fear that our students will be drawn to participate in any event focused on the statue and find themselves trapped between the warring factions,” the letter said.

Two days later, he followed up with the fiscal impact of the statue’s presence. McCracken told Folt that the October 2015 protest cost the University \$25,000 on police operations.

“The approximate cost will be the same for any announced event going forward, including tomorrow night,” he said.

McCracken also noted that the University spent about \$1,700 a day to maintain police presence in McCorkle Place.

"If required to continue with the current level of vigilance the cost will be approximately \$621,000 annually."

On the same day McCracken sent the second letter, members of UNC administration sent their own to Gov. Roy Cooper, telling him an imminent attack on Silent Sam was expected and asked if he would address the safety issues posed to the statue and students.

UNC called on the governor to convene the North Carolina Historical Commission to “consider what steps should be taken, consistent with the law.”

But Cooper's response sent the issue back across the table: “If our University leaders believe there is a real risk to public safety, the law allows them to take immediate measures.”

With the FDOC protest approaching, UNC heard mixed messages. Although Cooper is a Democrat, North Carolina's General Assembly is run by Republicans, and they appoint individuals to the Board of Governors, which manages the entire North Carolina higher education system.

“The University is now caught between conflicting legal interpretations of the statue from the Governor and other legal experts,” UNC responded. “The University can only act in accordance with the laws of the state of North Carolina.”

UNC Police set up bike rack barricades around Silent Sam on FDOC morning. Officers were distributed helmets and gas masks. Other law enforcement agencies were on standby.

The event was underway by 7 p.m. with a crowd size estimated to be between a few hundred to over a thousand, almost all anti-statue protestors.

At least three people were arrested, UNC Police considered the night a peaceful success. From that point forward, anti-monument groups began an around-the-clock sit in at the base of the statue and were accompanied by a 24/7 police presence.

UNC settled into the official stance that it lacked legal authority to remove Silent Sam on its own volition.

1913	1968	2015	Aug 2017	April 2018	Aug 2018	Sept 2018	D 2
Construction on Silent Sam is completed. Julian Carr delivers the commencement speech.	Statue is vandalized, then repaired, following MLK's assassination.	Gov. McCrory bolsters Silent Sam's legal standing by enacting Senate Bill 22.	White Supremacist rally in Charlottesville leaves one dead. Other universities remove Confederate memorials, UNC doesn't, major protest at McCorkle place follows.	Maya Little vandalizes Silent Sam — to contextualize it, she said — with red paint and her own blood.	Silent Sam torn down the night before FDOC 2018.	Board of Trustees made responsible for recommending a plan for Silent Sam's "disposition and preservation."	BO an Ne bu saf Sil So
THE RISE AND FALL OF UNC'S CONFEDERATE MONUMENT							

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Blood on whose hands?

Maya Little, a UNC graduate student and ardent anti-monument activist, became the face of the movement on April 30, 2018, when she took a can of red liquid — [which she said was a mix of paint and her own blood](#) — and dumped it on the statue. She said her intentions were to “contextualize” the statue, which she argued was built on white supremacy.

“Without that blood on the statue, it’s incomplete, in my opinion,” [she told the DTH](#).

She was arrested for defacing a public statue and released on a promise to appear in court in October.

This galvanized the anti-monument movement, and a protest in solidarity with Little was organized for the eve of FDOC 2018. Flyers started going up around town and campus.

Police learned about the upcoming event as early as July 2018. They monitored the social media postings and the rally's Facebook event, which was titled “Not One Left Standing.” Some police were under the impression the event would be sparsely attended, and few or no pro-monument groups would show up.

Only a few officers were initially asked to be on duty for the evening protest. However, Chapel Hill Police Chief Chris Blue told UNC Police Chief McCracken that 30-40 Chapel Hill officers would be in reserve if needed, but McCracken recalled Blue "admitted that politics were involved and that his officers would only protect people rather than the statue."

In the build-up to the protest, UNC administration grappled with whether or not to use the bike rack barricade strategy, which had been employed at previous protests.

According to the report, Chancellor Folt was confident she never issued a direct order to not use barricades for the protest, but there was an understanding sent down the chain of command that she didn't want them placed.

A football practice occurred two days before the protest where UNC Police, first responders and their families were invited to meet the team. On the field, Chief McCracken was told by an administrator that the Chancellor didn't want barricades used "because of what it would look like to students and their parents on the first weekend of the academic year."

The officer in charge of assembling the protest operations, who had previously only planned for football and basketball games, asked around for clarification on the decision to not use barricades. At that point, the consensus seemed to be that the decision was made by McCracken.

A morning briefing the day of the protest left many officers feeling apprehensive, and under the impression that the event would require more staffing than previously thought.

Silent Sam in the crosshairs

By 7:06 p.m., approximately 150 protestors had gathered in the Peace and Justice Plaza, only a few hundred feet from Silent Sam. In the presence of at least eight news outlets, Maya Little gave remarks to the crowd, and then they marched across the street onto campus. By this point, estimates of the crowd's size ranged from 200-350.

Several of the protestors were illegally wearing masks, and when a UNC police captain asked a group to remove them, most of them did so. However, one demonstrator refused, and a melee broke out as the captain attempted to arrest him. Multiple officers were attacked in the fray, and as the sun went down, a demonstrator threw a smoke bomb into the air.

While many of the officers were occupied in their attempt to arrest the mask-wearer, demonstrators hastily surrounded the statue with four grey and white backdrops. They zip-tied them together in a square shape around Silent Sam. Several officers said afterward the melee might have been a distraction, allowing protestors to control the statue's area.

Now that protestors had established a multi-layered perimeter around Silent Sam, police said it would have been impossible for them to break through the rings of people without resorting to extreme physical violence.

At 9:00 p.m. the majority of the crowd left Silent Sam's area, marching in the direction of the Columbia and Franklin Street intersection. In an effort to recoup control, between 15-28 officers surrounded the statue and formed a perimeter.

Approximately fifteen minutes later, most of the protestors returned. The report stated they then started to throw frozen water bottles and eggs at the officers, who were not wearing riot gear. A UNC police captain gave the order to "pull out" at approximately 9:17 p.m. The officers then assembled on the periphery of the protest and monitored the situation from there.

[Five minutes later, the story of UNC would be changed forever.](#) The crowd burst into celebration as the statue, tied with ropes by demonstrators, fell to the ground. Six individuals were issued arrest orders.

Politics take over: the University's response

When the dust cleared and classes started, Silent Sam's pedestal stood vacant. UNC Facilities had recovered the fallen soldier from the dirt in the rainy night, transporting it to a secure location. Its whereabouts are still unknown.

About an hour after the toppling, Folt released a statement characterizing the night's events as "unlawful and dangerous." UNC communications followed up the next day to dispel rumors that the administration directed the officers to allow protestors to destroy the monument.

"During the event, we rely on the experience and judgement of law enforcement to make decisions on the ground, keeping safety as the top priority," the Aug. 21 statement said.

Many officers interpreted UNC's stance as criticism of their work, and an attempt to deflect blame away from the administration. Some of them felt "that they had been set up to fail and were placed in a dangerous situation to which they were unprepared to respond."

In the coming days and weeks, multiple demonstrations took place at Silent Sam's former spot. There were skirmishes, arrests and barricades at the pedestal as the two opposing sides celebrated and mourned the statue's fall.

UNC, more so than ever wedged in a political gridlock, hesitated on publicizing its next steps. The consensus among state powers was that Senate Bill 22 — the law governing how public monuments should be treated — called for a resurrection of the statue within 90 days.

[A letter signed by professors from almost every department at UNC was sent to Folt and Provost Bob Blouin, telling them to keep Silent Sam down.](#)

The week after FDOC, UNC's Board of Trustees held a [special meeting](#) in which they received an order from the N.C. System Board of Governors: Develop a plan for the monument's "disposition and preservation" by Nov. 15.

Only one BOG member voted against the November deadline, saying it was too far away — Wilmington attorney Thom Goolsby. He had previously said Silent Sam would be returned to his post within 90 days.

"We will make sure that the laws of our state are enforced," he said.

Soon after, Chancellor Folt said she was grateful for the opportunity to figure out a clear path forward, and announced the statue did not belong "at the front door of a safe, welcoming, proudly public research university."

Many Black faculty members of UNC then [released a letter](#) advocating for Silent Sam's relocation, which was bolstered and supported by the signatures of over 400 additional UNC faculty.

Despite a strong consensus within the Chapel Hill community, 70 percent of likely N.C. voters disapproved of the toppling of Silent Sam, according to a [Civitas Institute poll released in September](#). Civitas Institute is a North Carolina-based conservative non-profit public policy group.

[Court dates for those arrested at the protests started to trickle through the docket as the semester got underway.](#) Maya Little was found guilty — but not issued a punishment — on her charge of defacing a public monument stemming from the blood and paint incident in April.

She faced the UNC honor court in October for the same charge. In a public hearing, Little's charges were dropped on appeal after an initial guilty finding. It turned out that one of the student jurors, a UNC law student, had outwardly supported Silent Sam in the past and insulted a UNC professor — who was on Little's witness list — on social media.

UNC System President Margaret Spellings announced in October that she would leave her post on March 1, 2019.

[When Nov. 15 came around, Folt announced UNC needed more time, and got permission from the Board of Governors to circle back in December.](#) And they did, recommending Silent Sam be housed in a [new, single-purpose building on South Campus](#) where it could be safely displayed and contextualized.

The "free-standing building with state-of-the-art security" came with a construction cost of \$5.3 million and \$800,000 in annual operating costs.

In response, a group of TAs decided to withhold final grades for the fall semester to protest the University's recommendation. However, the plan for a new building was denied by the Board of Governors — who cited cost and security reasons — and all grades were released.

"The plan we put forward did meet the letter of the charge from the Board of Governors but hasn't satisfied anyone, and we recognize that," Chancellor Folt told reporters after it was scrapped.

The Board of Governors decided to reassert control over the decision-making process, appointing a five-member committee to work toward a solution in conjunction with UNC, this time with a March 15, 2019 deadline.

Chancellor Folt had reached her tipping point.

Long a target of protestors' ire, Folt [reportedly had always been privately opposed to the statue's campus presence](#), but limited in her ability to act — those with the ability to fire her are mostly appointees of a Republican state legislature.

She submitted her resignation in mid-January — effective after graduation — to the Board of Governors in a closed session meeting. Unbeknownst to them, however, she had simultaneously authorized removal crews to excavate Silent Sam's pedestal from McCorkle place, which they did that night.

Three Board of Trustees members issued a statement in solidarity with the chancellor, but the Board of Governors was outraged. Chairman Harry Smith said her decision "lacks transparency and it undermines and insults the Board's goal to operate with class and dignity."

The News & Observer reported Smith emailed fellow board members following the teardown, outlining a hardline stance: "It's my intention to bring a vote to this governing body that will demand the statue be put back in place in a defined time line."

Folt's resignation was accelerated by Smith and the Board of Governors, made effective at the end of the month rather than the end of semester.

A disruption in UNC leadership followed.

UNC System President Margaret Spellings left her post on January 15, and was replaced by UNC Health Care CEO Bill Roper.

Roper then appointed Kevin Guskiewicz, former Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, as UNC Chapel Hill's chancellor. Both men are serving under interim titles, and have publicly denounced the idea of Silent Sam returning to campus.

[The March deadline was delayed again](#), for the third time, until May, and then postponed indefinitely. As Silent Sam remains in storage, the Board of Governors says its getting close to a final solution.

Chairperson Smith, a critic of Folt's insubordination and former advocate of Silent Sam's return to McCorkle Place, has evolved in his thinking since August. He said calls for resurrection were probably "quick and uneducated," and that conversations with UNC students have brought about a change in his perspective.

Although sympathy for Silent Sam withers among UNC administration and N.C. higher ed officials, many North Carolina voters and politicians are still perturbed by what they see as unchecked and unpunished vandalism. Political storm clouds are sure to accompany the next steps in the process — whatever they may be — but for now, the grass is green in McCorkle Place.
