

Finding Meaning in the Landscape and Criteria by Which to Assess it

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Every year thousands of visitors from around the world arrive on the VMI Post for no other reason than the knowledge of the Institute's reputation as the educator of some of America's best-known Citizen-Soldiers. They walk past academic halls, some old, some new; they stand before The Barracks. They pause at monuments and statues that recognize events and individuals significant to Institute and national history. They visit the VMI Museum and Memorial Gardens. Perhaps they will have a conversation with a random cadet; a young person who, in varying ways, represents the landscape the visitor is exploring.

Over the history of the Institute, that landscape has been formed with the cadet in mind. The buildings, monuments, and statues are subtle and silent teachers; reminders of the values and character expected of a VMI cadet. The architectural palate was chosen after great deliberation by Superintendent Francis H. Smith and eminent architect Alexander J. Davis. Statues and monuments followed, all intended to recognize service, achievement and, sometimes, sacrifice. All of it, buildings, statues, monuments and grounds, together creating the environment in which young men and women pursue their advancement of intellect and development of character.

This unique environment is recognized by the Commonwealth of Virginia and the nation by the establishment of the VMI Historic District. Many of the statues and monuments are contributing resources to the district. At the center of the district is The Barracks, which is singularly recognized as a National Historic Landmark. This distinction was awarded by the Department of Interior based on the architectural and cultural merits of its structure.

As current stewards, we must ensure that the intention of the VMI founders to create a landscape reflecting the aspirations of the Citizen-Soldier education is preserved. Much in the same manner that the curriculum is continually reviewed for relevance and academic integrity, we must ensure that the lessons offered by the landscape address the needs of the current and future Corps of Cadets.

At the same time we recognize our obligation of stewardship, so also must we balance and recognize the sensibilities, cultural responses, and emotions over the memorialization of people, places, and events associated with difficult times in our nation's history. We acknowledge our

responsibility to reconcile the landscape with these important issues for the benefit of the Corps of Cadets and the state.

Therefore, the charge of the VMI Board of Visitors Commemorations and Memorials Naming and Review sub-committee is to review landscape features that have taken on questionable meaning in contemporary society. The criteria by which the landscape is evaluated will craft the future lessons offered to cadets, alumni and the public. The criteria should be simple and straightforward:

1. **Original intent:** Sponsors of building names and creators of monuments, statues and memorials undertake their mission with forward looking intent. As society evolves, it is proper that original intent is reviewed as to relevance and value. A person selected for veneration by an earlier generation may have held beliefs or practices no longer acceptable in modern society. Such contradictions must be weighed in view of the honored person's over-all contribution to society and the purpose, or intent, of the original veneration. If the point of modern concern and the original intent of the recognition are the same, then continued public recognition of the person is in question. On the other hand, if the modern concern is tangential to, or not related to the recognition, the honoree's contributions to society and VMI may prevail as reason for continued public recognition.

Over time, a tribute may take on greater, new, and positive meaning beyond the limited purpose envisioned by the creators. The statue *Virginia Mourning Her Dead* provides an example. The 1869 work of Moses Ezekiel, VMI 1866, was created to address his personal loss of friends at the Battle of New Market. In 1904, VMI adopted the statue as a memorial to the VMI Civil War dead. Today the allegorical statue represents the 600 alumni who have died in wartime service, 1839-2020.

2. **Iconography:** Incorporation of iconography which no longer reflects the values and standards expected of society may constitute reason for a) contextual explanation, or b) removal. This approach would allow for an existing statue, monument, or memorial to be altered in a manner so as to address iconographic concerns and enhance the educational value of the resource. If the point of concern is controversial iconography inherent or fundamental to the design of the resource, preservation of the memorial should be

carefully reviewed and only the most compelling of reasons should allow its continued display.

Society, even a small college society, will not find absolute agreement in what, who, or how to recognize its greatest achievements or create public models of emulation. The debate and acceptance of varying positions will assure the continued health and positive evolution of that society.

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