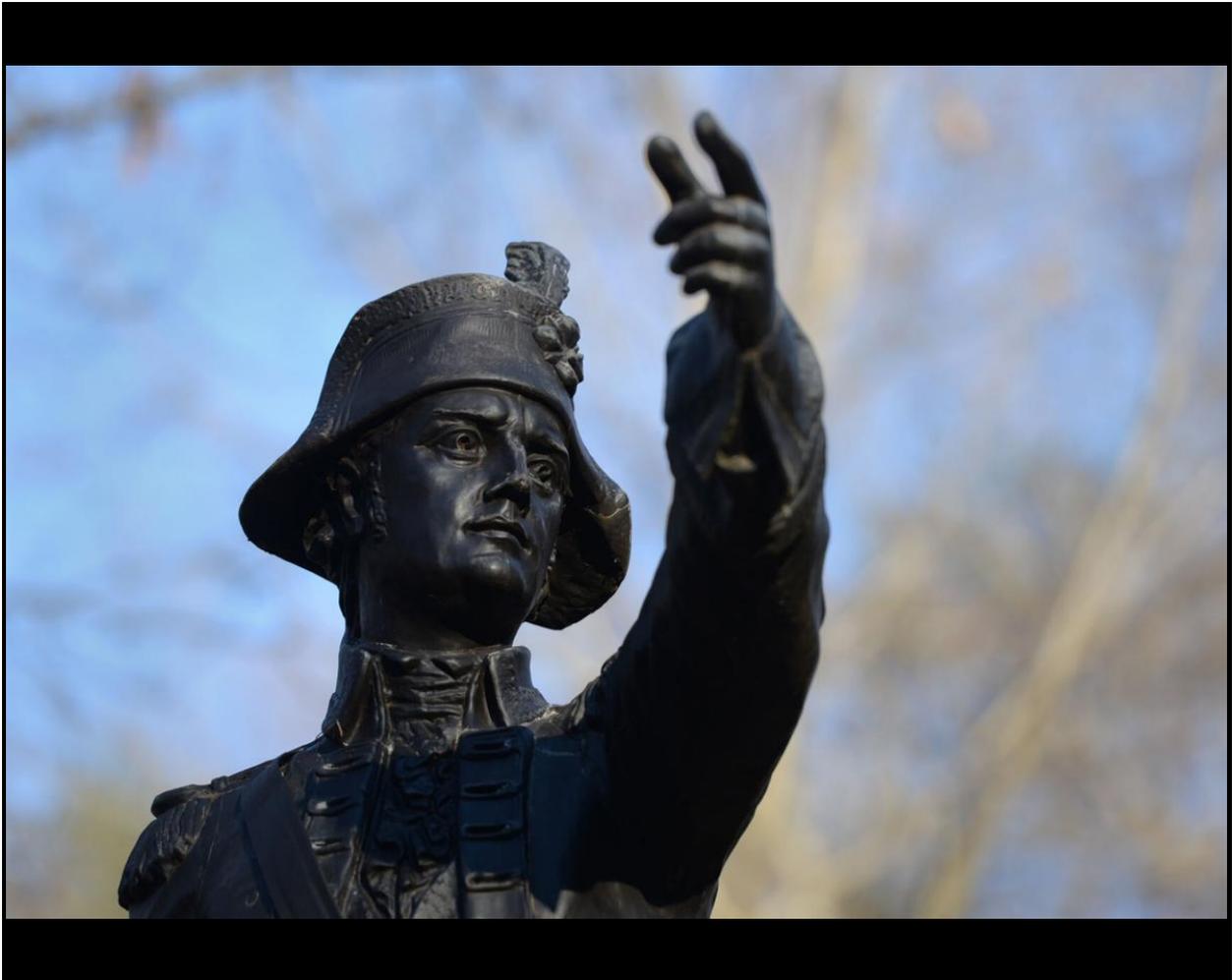


Joanna Winston Foley: Should my ancestor's statue in Greensboro come down?

Aug 16, 2020



The monument to Maj. Joseph Winston, the Revolutionary War hero for whom the town of Winston was named, is one of 28 within Guilford Courthouse National Military Park.





The Holt monument at the Guilford Courthouse National Military Park was erected on July 4, 1893. The statue of Maj. Joseph Winston was added in 1903.

Greensboro, N.C., September 2013.

A bronze-ish statue of a soldier brandishing a sword in his right hand rivets my attention as I approach its granite base. His upraised left arm gestures urgently: “Follow me! We’ll confront the British!”

When I view this monument at the Guilford Courthouse National Military Park, I feel proud that Maj. Joseph Winston (1746-1815) was my ancestor. Revolutionary War militia leader in three battles. Elected to the North Carolina Senate and then to Congress. Trustee of the University of North Carolina.

Violence against Black people becomes visible to all. A video of a Minneapolis police officer killing George Floyd has created huge waves of protest all over the U.S. People have risen up to demand that law enforcement become accountable for the safety of all those they swear to serve and protect.

The widespread protests soon focus on statues, flags and other symbols of racism and white supremacy that dominate many public spaces. A major deconstruction of monuments to Confederate leaders and slaveholders begins.

Suddenly the awareness that Joseph Winston was a slaveholder has hit me forcefully.

This is not new information but now it has a strong emotional impact. During my heritage visit to Greensboro seven years ago, these two aspects of his life — Joseph Winston's public service to help build the new American nation and his private moral failure to live up to his

Christian faith — sat side by side in my consciousness without quite connecting.

This blind spot, big as a boulder, remained in place until June 2020. The word "privilege" comes to mind — the white privilege of avoiding discomfort.

As those statues came crashing down, so did that blind spot that separated my feelings about my ancestor. Reviewing Winston's life, I now felt ashamed and embarrassed that I was once proud of my family connection to him. A man who exercised ownership over Black men, women and children!

I was far from the only one whose ancestor had just tumbled — metaphorically or literally — from a pedestal. Like me, other descendants of slaveholders began to deplore public memorials to their own once-admired ancestors.

In a July 7 op-ed in *The New York Times*, one of Thomas Jefferson's descendants called for taking down the Jefferson Memorial in the nation's capital. Lucian K. Truscott IV suggested replacing his ancestor's statue with one of Harriet Tubman, "a woman who helped to bring into being a more perfect union after slavery, a process which continues to this day."

I hope many others are joining Lucian Truscott and me in listening to Black Lives Matter activists. They're reminding everyone that monuments not only don't teach history, but instead they teach values. What a society honors and what is worthy of celebration can be seen in its public icons. What images should we retire and what new images should we put forward?

I'm grappling with questions about my moral responsibility as a descendant of a white man who held other human beings in lifelong bondage. According to Native American historian Jack Forbes, living persons are not responsible for what their ancestors did but they are responsible for the society they live in today, which is a product of that past.

What does being responsible for the society I live in mean right now? The shocking realization for me is that my blind spot about Winston's life had actually co-existed for years alongside my political activism for racial justice. Marching and sitting in for civil rights in 1960s Nashville, Tenn. Community organizing for the Chicago Urban League. Practicing journalism in New York that centered on people of color.

Soon after my trip to Greensboro in 2013, I joined a progressive church in Berkeley, Calif. We invited Black guest speakers, celebrated works by Black artists and supported Black Lives Matter with a large outdoor sign.

My actions may have made me look as if I were "woke." But I now realize that some of my thinking had still been deeply asleep. Indeed, that's how privilege works, allowing me to pick and choose what I would see and what I would deny.

Greensboro is where this story began. So I decided to check in with local media to follow the changes taking place here. A Black Lives Matter mural in the streets. Protests against the death of John Neville in the Forsyth County jail. Questions about whether minority contractors get a fair share of public expenditures.

I feel a particular responsibility to support the racial justice work in Greensboro while continuing my ongoing activism in Berkeley. As a

first step, I looked online and found the strong #GSOAgainstRacism pledge created by the Chamber of Commerce. I signed it, posted it in my study and called the chamber to get more information.

And what about that statue of Joseph Winston? Now I wonder, if local activists decide that its removal is their priority, will I join them?