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P.O Box 1053, Hartsville, SC 29551

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The members of the South Carolina African American Heritage Commission would like to register our opposition to the ill-informed proposal to erect a monument in honor of South Carolina's Civil War-era African American Confederate pensioners.

First, we all can agree that the idea of a monument to recognize the significant role African Americans played in the Civil War is a worthwhile pursuit. However, a monument to commemorate the men forced into glory is essentially an attempt to rewrite the history of African American contributions to America's freedom struggle.

In its current

iteration, the proposal is ahistorical, insulting and uninformed. The suggestion that African American slaves had the ability to choose to volunteer for service in the Confederate cause is preposterous. Since there were no volunteers then, these men were forced into service. They were, in fact, men who were coerced to labor against their wills. African Americans have always cherished freedom and dedicated themselves to the cause of liberty. The Confederacy originated out of the very idea of denying African Americans freedom.

The Confederate government was built on the institution of slavery and undergirded with the regressive ideas of White supremacy. The fact that the majority of African Americans who participated in the war effort did so on the side of the Union, speaks volumes. The Confederacy rejected black participation in its cause, until that very cause was little more than a concept, and wanted nothing to do with African American soldiers. They only saw Blacks as servants and pawns in a very dangerous game. As Alexander Stephens, the Vice President of the Confederacy, said in 1861, the US Constitution was fundamentally wrong because it guaranteed Black equality. Stephens said,

"Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. It was a sandy foundation, and the idea of a Government built upon it-when the storm came and the wind blew, it fell. Our new Government is founded upon exactly the opposite ideas; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition. This, our new Government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth. This truth has been slow in the process of its development, like all other truths in the various departments of science."¹

The idea that African Americans would volunteer to fight for a government built on those principles defies logic.

The issues that divided the nation in the mid-19th century continue to plague us today. The fact that some legislators are willing to recognize the service of African Americans during the war is commendable. However, the fact that they would commend those who were coerced into service against their will is misguided.

The Civil War is part of the difficult American past. As one member of the Commission whose great, great, grandfather actually received one of those pensions stated, "My relative's pension records state clearly that he was a SERVANT under Jesse and Barney Foreman of Barnwell County (later Aiken.) Instead of a monument about my grandfather's *service in the Confederate Army*, let's raise a monument in honor and memory of the many thousands (like him) who were victimized and killed for daring to be free." His relative served from 1861-1865 and then was targeted by rioters during the 1876 Ellenton Riot for trying to vote. It wasn't until 1923 that he received a Confederate pension.

If the state really wants to honor the service of African Americans during the war, we suggest supporting those who want to build a monument to Robert Smalls, a man who gave his service trying to build a better South Carolina with the admirable goal of racial equality and not racial oppression.

Dr. Abel A. Bartley, Chairman
South Carolina African American Heritage Commission

¹ "Speech of A. H. Stephens," Frank Moore, ed., *Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events, with Documents, Narratives, Illustrative Incidents, Poetry, etc.* Volume I, (New York: 1861), 45-46.

