Confederate monuments in New Orleans: Where will they go next?

BY CHELSEA BRASTED, NOLA.COM

If J.C. Hanna had his way, New Orleans' Confederate monuments would stay right where they are.

"I don't want to see them move, period," said Hanna, commander of the Louisiana division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. "I don't know of anywhere else in New Orleans they could be put where they'd have a place of respect. I really don't."

After removing the Jefferson Davis monument early Thursday (May 11), the city is moving forward with plans to take down two more Confederate monuments, and it's not yet clear exactly where they'll eventually land. The Battle of Liberty Place obelisk, which was taken down April 24, and the Jefferson Davis statue are being stored at an undisclosed city warehouse.

A 6-1 City Council vote in December 2015 declared statues of P.G.T. Beauregard, Robert E. Lee, Davis and the Battle of Liberty Place monuments public nuisances that could be removed. Since then Mayor Mitch Landrieu and other city officials have said the statues should be placed in a public setting with the "proper context."

But with heated debate and protests on both sides of the issue, determining what that context would look like stands to be difficult decision to make.

"There's an idea that (they) represent southern heritage. I just have to guess for someone who wants to believe that, it must be real. It certainly is not the case for a good percentage of the population," said Marcus Cox, a professor at Xavier University in New Orleans specializing in African-American civil and military history.

Cox was on the faculty at The Citadel in June 2015 when Dylann Roof killed nine people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church about 3 miles from the military academy's campus in Charleston, South Carolina. The racially motivated shooting prompted nationwide protests against Confederate symbols.

Landrieu and other city officials have cited security issues and stayed mum about plans for when the monuments will continue to be removed. In an email, Landrieu's press secretary, Erin Burns, said they would be temporarily held at a city-owned storage facility.
"Moving the location of these Confederate statues from prominent public places in our city where they are revered to a place where they can be remembered is an acknowledgement that it is time to take stock of, and then move past a painful part of our history," she wrote.

"There's really no simple answer," said Tulane University associate professor Jonathan Pritchett, who has studied economic issues between black and white Americans. "What is an appropriate way to show these monuments and to what extent are you glorifying a troubling past? That's something that has to be handled with great care."

Thomas Payne, executive director at Beauvoir, the Biloxi, Mississippi, estate that houses the Jefferson Davis Presidential Library and was his final home, said his team has already reached out to New Orleans officials in the hopes their property could take the Davis statue -- or all of the monuments off the city's hands.

"We'll take whatever monuments," said Payne, who noted the request was made before he began working at Beauvoir in January. "Our interest is in preserving history, and we certainly don't want history to be erased or otherwise eliminated And, if nowhere else, then we'd certainly love to have them and give them a place of honor."

At 52 acres, Payne said the Beauvoir property could easily house the monuments, which are sizable and would in all likelihood have to remain outdoors as they were originally intended.

"A lot of people would want to come see them, and they'd all be here together in short distance of each other," Payne said. "It's a win-win for us once the city and citizens of New Orleans decide what they can legally do. We're ready to receive them."

Burns with the mayor's office confirmed Beauvoir representatives had been in contact with the city, noting Landrieu or members of his staff have also spoken with representatives from Washington and Lee University and the Smithsonian Museum "to gauge interest in displaying" the monuments.

"While no final decision has been made, there are a number of ways that the City can allow anyone who is interested to legally acquire the statues," she wrote in the email.

More locally, it's not clear if the Confederate Memorial Hall Museum, which is on Camp Street with limited outdoor space, would want the statues. A representative offered no comment when asked about what
staff there thought of making the museum a possible future location for the memorials.

Davis, Lee and Beauregard won't be headed upriver to the Whitney Plantation in the St. John the Baptist Parish community of Wallace. New Orleans lawyer John Cummings has transformed the property into a museum dedicated to slavery in the United States. In explaining his aversion to acquiring the sculptures, Cummings refuted any rumors that he’s the anonymous donor who put up the cash to take them down in the first place.

"I have no interest" in the memorials, Cummings said. "I have not paid a penny. No one’s asked me to pay a penny. ... I think they should be kept in the city of New Orleans. That’s about as far as I’ve gone."

Cox, the Xavier University history professor, agreed it would make sense for the monuments to stay in New Orleans, or at least in Louisiana.

"You shouldn’t go back and rewrite history. That is United States history, it’s southern history. But I think that when you have those types of symbols in public spaces that are controversial or tend to offend people, you need to have that open dialogue," Cox said. "It makes people uncomfortable, and they don’t want to learn from their mistakes."