

Dear Gillings School faculty and staff members and students,

My purpose in writing is to provide a perspective on the toppling of the Confederate statue called Silent Sam that occurred August 20 on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus. First, an excerpt from a doctoral dissertation provides context for the period, referred to as Jim Crow, in which the statue was installed on the campus and the events surrounding the dedication. Note, especially, near the end, mentions of “Lost Causes” and white supremacy which, according to author Chapman, are invoked by the statue’s inscription.

In a dissertation titled, [\*Black Freedom and the University of North Carolina, 1793-1960\*](#), by John K. Chapman (2006), the author wrote about Silent Sam:

*The erection of the “Soldiers Monument” not only commemorated the sons of the university who died fighting for the Confederacy in the Civil War; it also celebrated an ideal and a cherished interpretation of history that the men who led the university wanted to instill in future generations. In one of the hundreds of letters sent to UNC alumni seeking contributions to fund the monument, Venable (then UNC president) wrote, “A fitting monument is to be erected on the campus this year to the sons of the University who heard the call of their country and served in the War of 1861-65. This will commemorate the heroic era in the history of the University and I believe the glorious record to be unparalleled among the colleges of this or any other country. Further, it commemorates the greatest lesson that a man can learn, namely, that the call of duty is supreme. The monument will stand as a lesson in stone and bronze to all succeeding generations of Students.”*

*The lesson Venable meant to teach was spelled out in the inscription that appeared in bronze on one side of the monument base: “To the sons of the University who entered the War of 1861-65 and whose heroism taught the lesson of their great Commander, that Duty is the sublimest word in the English language.”*

*Governor Craig expanded on these themes of duty and sacrifice, making it clear that the “great Commander’s” words pertained as much to the present as they did to the past. He proclaimed, “Answering the Supreme requisition, the University laid upon the altar of Dixie the fairest and the bravest of the world. This statue is a memorial to their chivalry and devotion.*

*We unveil and dedicate this monument today as a covenant that we too will do our task with fidelity and courage.” While the identity of Venable’s “great Commander” may not be self-evident to those pondering the meaning of the monument inscription today, few among those gathered to view the unveiling would have been at a loss. Venable’s “great Commander” was Robert E. Lee, former commander of the Confederate armies and a central icon of the movement to promote the “Lost Cause” mythology, which had become a powerful force throughout the South since Reconstruction. This movement endorsed a set of values including duty to defend white supremacy, male chivalry to protect white womanhood, and pride in a heroic and patriotic southern military tradition. To justify these values, Lost Cause enthusiasts promoted a version of history that proclaimed the South’s innocence with regard to slavery. The Confederacy went to war to defend freedom, not slavery, and, in any case, slavery was a civilizing influence on Africans.”*

Monday night, August 20, Silent Sam was toppled on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus. Its fall was a long time in coming. It was a tempest brewing long before the statue was dedicated in 1913 with a ceremony on the campus. As Chapman documented in a dissertation from this university, the statue reflected the values and culture of its period, the Jim Crow South, and all that had preceded it.

The statue’s location at the main, most important entrance to the university sent an implicit message to all who came that those values and culture still dominated. The Confederate soldier stood on a pedestal from which it looked outward, giving its presence gravitas. Those who had been invited to speak at the dedication reinforced the messages that resonated with people of the era. As Chapman described, while some Black people stood on the sidelines, they were not part of the celebration. There was nothing for them to celebrate.

Life was hard for Black people in Chapel Hill in 1913. They were neither considered equal nor welcomed. The statue may have been made of stone and bronze and inanimate, but it spoke loudly over the course of decades. It is no surprise that feelings about the *Unsilent* Sam simmered and sometimes boiled over in the ensuing years. An ever-potent symbol of a past we said we aimed to transcend, the statue sent a powerful, contradictory message. In its silence, it spoke loudly. It’s no wonder that, as other states sought to move beyond the past by removing statues, our inability to do so caused wounds to fester until the pain became

unbearable. It is not surprising that it happened Monday night. It is only surprising that it did not happen sooner. One hundred and five years of simmering were bound to lead to a boil.

We live in an uncertain time, a time in which people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, Muslims, those who love in previously unrecognized ways, and many others feel vulnerable, sometimes afraid, angry, and unheard, marginalized. Our students and many young people, especially, who came of age in what was supposed to be a post-racial society, saw the contradiction between so much that is great about this magnificent university (which truly is great), and the loudness with which Sam proclaimed a different message, one of adulation for, and sanitized remembrance of, the Jim Crow South. They could not understand its presence, and felt violated by it, and so did many of the rest of us who truly love this institution. Slavery and Jim Crow should be studied and understood, especially, their implications for the present, but they should not be venerated – and they have no place on today's campus or in society.

Numerous public health and other studies have shown that inequity among people contributes to ill health through multiple pathways, such as decreased access to health care, poorer nutrition, lower levels of education and income, and increased, well-documented stressors that particularly oppress people of color and, in turn, influence behavioral factors, such as smoking.

Silent Sam was an overseer of conditions that led to poor health; to this day, on many health measures, minorities fare worse. Central to our School's mission, we aim to overcome health inequities which cannot be separated from other inequities, for example, in income, housing and education. Sam signaled all those inequities that held people back, legacies that leave their traces even today. It's one of the reasons our students and others have spoken of avoiding the entrance to UNC-Chapel Hill that would have had them passing the statue. One student said it made her feel "ill." Sam was a relic of another time, a time most of us want to see behind us. Sam divided us, made us less than whole. Now, it is time to move forward, to reconcile the past and the present, the advocates for and against, past the hatred, bigotry and inequities that dominated the early twentieth century, and, sadly, continue. It is time for reconciliation. What now?

[Milton Rosenau](#), the Gillings School's first dean and former dean at Harvard, famously said, "We find monuments erected to heroes who have won wars, but we find none commemorating anyone's preventing a war. The same is true with epidemics." Rosenau published his most important work, [Preventive Medicine and Hygiene](#), in 1913 – the same year Silent Sam was erected and dedicated on the UNC campus (and 23 years before Rosenau arrived at UNC).

In place of Sam, there could be erected a statue to a person or group who furthered the causes of peace, equity and prevention. It could become a symbol of hope and healing, a visible commitment to move forward with intention. (I would contribute to it.) Let us celebrate these virtues, the many ties that bind us to one another and this great university and accept the challenge of making a better future—for all of us. We have a choice now. We can walk forward along the road to the future together, based on a commitment to equity in all domains, justice, diversity and inclusion, or dwell in the past.

I'd far rather dwell in the future. But first, we should talk.

Warm regards,



Barbara K. Rimer

*The views expressed in this message are mine alone and do not represent the views and policies of The University of North Carolina or the Gillings School.*