

**POLITICS & GOVERNMENT**

# 72 history professors sign letter urging removal of Jefferson Davis statue from Kentucky Capitol

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FRANKFORT — Seventy-two historians from 16 public and private colleges and universities in Kentucky want a controversial statue of Confederate President Jefferson Davis removed from the state Capitol.

The statue's presence in the Capitol rotunda "minimizes the significance of slavery as a cause of the Civil War, downplays the human suffering of millions and endows the Southern cause with a nobility it does not deserve," said a letter signed and sent to state lawmakers by the current and former historians.

The letter also was sent to Gov. Steve Beshear and the Kentucky Historic Properties Advisory Commission.

The commission voted 7-2 in early August to keep the statue in the Capitol, where it stands with statues of President Abraham Lincoln and three other prominent Kentuckians: 19th-century statesman Henry Clay, frontier surgeon Ephraim McDowell and former U.S. Vice President Alben Barkley.

The all-white panel also voted to set up a committee that would provide more historical context to accompany statues in the Capitol.

Beshear asked the panel to review the statue's placement after the shooting deaths of nine people in a South Carolina church, allegedly by a man who had an affinity for Confederate symbols.

Carolyn Dupont, associate professor of history at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, said Monday that it was her idea for the state's history professors to address the issue.

"I ran it by three of my colleagues in the state. We talked about it, tweaked the letter and sent it out to the major public and private institutions of higher learning in Kentucky," Dupont said.

The only responses against the letter, she said, came from the history faculty of University of the Cumberlands in Williamsburg and one University of Louisville history professor.

"They basically saw it as trying to erase history, when it is actually an attempt to be sure what persons are put in a position of honor," she said.

Christopher Leskiw, head of the history department at University of the Cumberlands, did not return phone calls Monday seeking comment. The private, liberal arts university of about 3,200 students is affiliated with the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

Dupont said the 72 historians who want the Davis statue removed from the Capitol were not satisfied with the historic properties commission's decision.

She said she was out of the country when the commission sought public comment before voting on it.

The commission's desire to put the statue in an educational context is misguided and will send mixed messages, Dupont said.

The professors' letter said, "On the one hand, the statute celebrates Davis as an eminently honorable man, while on the other a plaque would inevitably inform visitors that he defended a brutal system of human bondage, committed treason against the United States, and helped start the bloodiest war in our history."

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Dupont said the historians who signed the letter think the Davis statue should be in a museum.

She also said the professors "stand ready to help select a worthy alternative."

Her preference would be a woman or a black person.

House Speaker Greg Stumbo, D-Prestonsburg, said last month that he would file legislation early in the 2016 General Assembly, which begins in January, to move the Davis statue to the Kentucky History Center in downtown Frankfort.

Stumbo had no additional comment Monday on the professors' letter.

Senate President Robert Stivers, R-Manchester, did not respond to a request for comment about the letter. He has said he did not know how Stumbo's legislation would fare in the Senate.

A recent Bluegrass Poll showed that 73 percent of Kentuckians think the statue should stay where it is.

Both major political party nominees in this fall's race for governor — Democrat Jack Conway and Republican Matt Bevin — have said the statue should be moved.

Independent candidate Drew Curtis said Monday that he also preferred moving the statue to a museum, but "if the statue is left in place I'd want the plaque changed to make it clear that it isn't honoring him."

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