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"Whatever Happened to the Statue of Edmund Kirby Smith?"

By Randy Jaye

In 1922, the state of Florida gifted a 2,762-pound bronze statue of Confederate General Edmund Kirby Smith to the National Statuary Hall Collection in the United States Capitol building in Washington, DC. The collection is limited to two statues per state and is intended to honor notable persons in the history of each state. Smith's statue was created by prominent American sculptor Charles Adrian Pillars (1870-1937) who worked from a studio in St. Augustine. In 1914, Pillars created the statue of John Gorrie, the physician and scientist who invented mechanical refrigeration and is widely considered the father of air conditioning. Gorrie's statue still represents Florida in Statuary Hall.



Created by the prominent U.S. sculptor Charles Adrian Pillars (1870-1937). The Edmund Kirby Smith statue stood in the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center from 1922 to 2021. (Source: Public Domain).

A National Controversy Surrounding Confederate Memorials

Controversy surrounding the statue of Edmund Kirby Smith, which glorifies a leader of the Confederate States of America, picked up momentum across Florida in the late 2010s as a nationwide backlash against publicly displayed Confederate memorials raged. On March 19, 2018, Florida Governor Rick Scott signed legislation to replace the Edmund Kirby Smith statue with one of Mary McLeod Bethune,

the African American civil rights activist, educator, humanitarian, philanthropist, and womanist. The statue of Edmund Kirby Smith stood in the U.S. Capitol building for 99 years (from 1922 to September 4, 2021). On July 13, 2022, it was officially replaced with the marble statue of Mary McLeod Bethune.

The vast majority of Confederate memorials were erected between 1890 and 1960, with peak construction occurring between 1900 and 1930—well after the Civil War which ended in 1865. Virulent racism prevailed in the U.S. during the opening decades of the twentieth century, especially in the South where white supremacy was manifested by Jim Crow (segregation) laws, disenfranchisement, lynching, and mob violence. Many Confederate memorials were erected by white women organizations, with the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) in the forefront. Founded in 1894, the UDC consists of the descendants of Confederate soldiers, who seek to commemorate and perpetuate the noble Confederate soldier mythology. UDC's President General, Linda Edwards, defends the maintenance of Confederate monuments claiming that "...they simply represent a memorial to our forefathers who fought bravely during four years of war. These memorial statues and markers have been a part of the Southern landscape for decades."

Those calling for the removal of Confederate memorials from public spaces claim that these memorials are offensive because they misrepresent history and are racist and offensive because they honor people who promoted the enslavement of Blacks and committed treason by waging war against the United States which resulted in the battle deaths of approximately 620,000 to 750,000 men—by far the bloodiest war in American history. In 2020 the *Stanford News* asserted that the recent toppling of Confederate monuments and memorials across the United States is a part of an overdue racial reckoning for America. Stanford University historian James T. Campbell said, "Understanding that historical context makes it a lot harder to claim that these monuments and memorials are simply 'heritage,' innocent of any racial meaning."

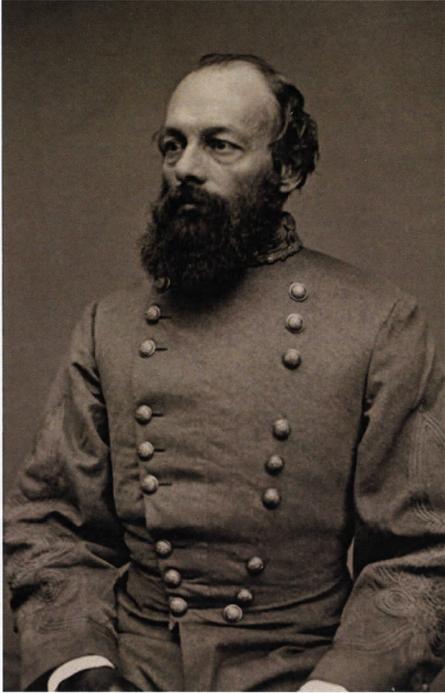
According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, in 2000 there were more than 2,000 **Confederate**

memorials throughout the United States, with approximately 1,500 occupying public spaces and many in states that never seceded from the Union. As of 2021, an estimated 270 Confederate monuments have been removed by protesters or by government action, leaving approximately 1,700 still in place.

Who was Edmund Kirby Smith?

Despite the controversy surrounding the statue of Edmund Kirby Smith and its unprecedented removal

from the National Statuary Hall Collection, few people know who the man was or his relationship to Florida. Smith was the first native Floridian appointed to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. However, he moved from Florida as a child and never fought in Florida during the Civil War.



Portrait of Confederate General Edmund Kirby Smith, circa 1861-65. (Source: Public Domain)

Edmund Kirby Smith was born on May 16, 1824, in St. Augustine, but left Florida in 1836 to attend a military school in Virginia. Smith was admitted to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point where he graduated in 1845, receiving a commission as a brevet second lieutenant in the 5th U.S. Infantry. On August 22, 1846, less than four months after the start of the Mexican-American War, Smith was promoted to second lieutenant in the 7th U.S. Infantry. Before the war ended in 1848, he had achieved the rank of captain. During the war Smith served under Generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott. From 1849 to 1852 he served in the 2nd U.S. Calvary in Texas. Afterwards, Smith was stationed at West Point where he taught mathematics. He also studied botany and categorized several species of plants native to Tennessee and Florida.

On January 31, 1861, Smith was promoted to major. However, he resigned from the U.S. Army on March 16, 1861, to join the Confederate Army as a major. Smith swiftly rose in rank. On June 17, 1861, he was promoted to brigadier-general and put in command of a brigade in the Army of the Shenandoah. He was severely injured during the First Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861, and while recuperating commanded the Department of Middle and East Florida.

From 1855 until the end of the Civil War Smith was accompanied by a valet named Alexander Darnes, a mixed-race enslaved person owned by his family and who may have been Smith's half-brother. After acquiring his freedom at the war's end, Darnes became Florida's second Black physician. Meanwhile, On September 24, 1861, Smith married Cassie Selden. They had five sons and six daughters.

On October 11, 1861, Smith was promoted to major-general and assigned to command a division of the Army of Northern Virginia. Smith was then assigned to command the eastern division of the Army of Mississippi. His army won the Battle of Richmond, Kentucky (August 29-30, 1862), one of the most decisive Confederate victories of the Civil War. In gratitude, the Confederate Congress honored him with the "Thanks of Congress" award on February 17, 1864, and on February 19, 1864, he was promoted to general, becoming one of only seven full generals in the Confederate Army.

On January 14, 1863, Smith became commander of the Confederacy's Trans-Mississippi Department (comprising Arkansas, Missouri, Texas, western Louisiana, Arizona Territory and the Indian Territory). He remained west of the Mississippi River for the duration of the war. When the Union secured control of the Mississippi River by capturing Vicksburg and Port Hudson in July 1863, Smith and his troops found themselves cut off from Confederate forces east of the Mississippi. The area under his command became known as the "Kirby Smithdom" because of its lack of support from Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy. Despite his army's isolation, Smith was able to ward off Union offensive operations into "Kirby Smithdom," most

notably defeating the Federal Red River Expedition in April 1864. However, he was unable to break through Union lines and re-connect with Confederate armies east of the Mississippi.

After it became evident that the Confederate cause was lost, Smith surrendered his army at Galveston, Texas on June 2, 1865—the last full general to surrender to the Union. Fearing prosecution for treason, Smith promptly fled to Mexico and then to Cuba. Taking advantage of President Andrew Johnson’s leniency toward Confederate leaders, Smith returned to the U.S. and was granted amnesty in Lynchburg, Virginia on November 14, 1865, after taking a loyalty oath that bound him to “faithfully support, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States, and the Union of the States thereunder.”

After the war, Smith served as president of the Atlantic and Pacific Telegraph Company from 1866 to 1868, and then entered academia. In 1870, he started a preparatory school in New Castle, Kentucky, but it soon burned down. From 1870 to 1875, he became the chancellor of the University of Nashville. In 1875, he found long-term success as a professor of mathematics and botany at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. Edmund Kirby Smith, the last surviving full general from the Civil War, remained at the University of the South until his death from pneumonia on March 28, 1893.

The Uncertain Future of the Edmund Kirby Smith Statue

After Governor Rick Scott signed the legislation in 2018 that replaced the Edmund Kirby Smith statue with that of Mary McLeod Bethune in Statuary Hall, efforts to secure a new home for the Smith statue began in earnest. Those efforts have not been successful. St. Augustine, Smith’s birthplace, joined a list of cities that have been confronting their racist past and removing Confederate monuments from public spaces. In 2020, the city commission voted 3-2 to remove a Confederate memorial obelisk from the Plaza de la Constitución. Erected in 1872, it was the oldest Confederate Civil War monument in Florida.

There was some discussion about moving the Edmund Kirby Smith statue into Smith’s childhood home, the Segui-Kirby Smith house, owned and operated by the St. Augustine Historical Society and home to the St. Augustine Historical Society Research Library, but that never materialized. The house

already has a statue, the “Sons of St. Augustine,” which depicts Smith (along with Alexander Darnes) wearing a professional robe representing his later life as a college professor. Thomas Graham, professor emeritus of history at Flagler College said, “Putting another Kirby Smith statue in their courtyard might complicate things a little bit...It would be simpler just to keep the statue they’ve already got there. He’s not in his Confederate uniform and is not in any way triumphal, so that statue has never aroused any opposition whatsoever.”



The Segui-Kirby Smith House is a historic house at 12 Aviles Street in St. Augustine, Florida. Built in the late 1770s, it was the childhood home of Confederate General Edmund Kirby Smith.

Source: (Public Domain)

On August 6, 2019, the Lake County commissioners voted to move the Edmund Kirby Smith statue to the courthouse in Tavares after the Lake County Historical Society and Museum expressed interest in having the statue reside in Lake county. However, on July 7, 2020, after hundreds of people denounced the decision, the commissioners reversed their earlier vote. Therefore, the statue will not be going to Lake County and the final destination of the Edmund Kirby Smith statue remains unknown. It is currently in storage at the Museum of Florida History in Tallahassee. In September 2022, Florida Department of State spokesman Mark Ard told the *Tampa Bay Times*, “The statute will be relocated and transported to the Museum of Florida History and we anticipate transferring the statue to another museum in

the future to be made available for public display in Florida.” Thomas Graham advised, “Wherever it goes, the statue should be accompanied by an interpretive statement, which places the figure in historical context.”

The Statue of Mary McLeod Bethune

Replacing the Edmund Kirby Smith statue in the National Statuary Hall Collection was the statue of Mary McLeod Bethune. It was created by master sculptor, Nilda Maria Comas, in her studio in Pietrasanta, Italy (she also has a studio in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida). The statue stands eight feet four inches tall and weighs 6,129 pounds.



**Mary McLeod Bethune statue (bust view),
The News-Journal Center, Daytona Beach.**

Photograph by Randy Jaye

The statue of Mary McLeod Bethune represents the first Black person selected by a state for the National Statuary Hall collection. It was carved from a block of marble weighing eleven and a half tons that was the last piece of marble removed from Michelangelo’s cave in the Italian Alps.

**Mary McLeod Bethune statue
(full front view),
The News-Journal Center,
Daytona Beach
Photograph by Randy Jaye**



The statue was completed in June 2021, and then was unveiled during a blessing ceremony in Pietrasanta’s town square the following month. The Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune Statuary Fund, Inc., which raised the \$500,000 it cost to make the statue, describes those elements on its website, <https://www.mmbstatue.org/> :

Cap & Gown: Dr. Bethune has been fashioned in a stately cap and gown symbolizing her lifelong commitment to education.

Black Rose: The black rose symbolizes her belief that “loving thy neighbor” means interracial, inter-religious and international brotherhood and her facial expression captures her determined yet gentle demeanor. Although there is no species of flower called a “black rose,” Dr. Bethune was captivated by beauty of a rose with a particular dark hue. These dark roses instantly became her favorite. She thereafter referred to her pupils as her “black roses.”

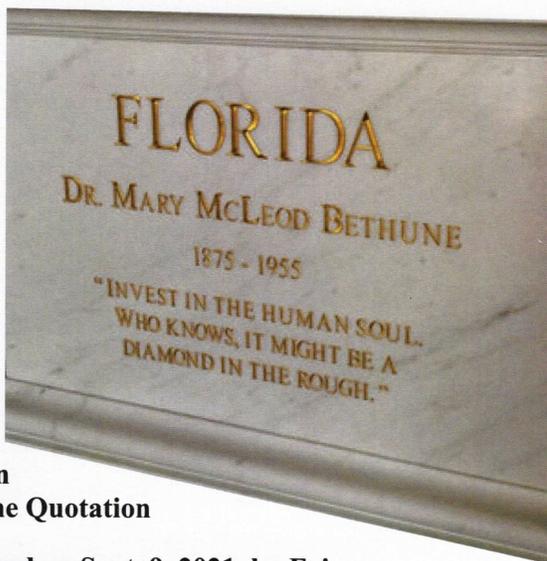
Walking Stick: Bethune collected walking sticks believing them to symbolize refinement and leadership. The walking stick is in the likeness of the gift from President Franklin Roosevelt presented to Dr. Bethune during her lifetime. It signifies the relationship she cultivated with President Roosevelt, the profound respect she engendered on the national stage and her commitment to advancing opportunities for African Americans and women.

Stacked Books: on top of the pedestal which supports the Bethune statue, next to the statue’s feet, lie a stack of four books, and on each book binding is inscribed with a tenant from Bethune’s last will and testament, a distilled list of her principles and policies which she entrusted to African Americans to give them inspiration: “love, hope, a thirst for education, faith, racial dignity, a desire to live harmoniously with your fellow men, and a responsibility to our young people....Faith, courage, brotherhood, dignity, ambition, responsibility...I pray now that my philosophy may be helpful to those who share my vision of a world of Peace.”



**Sculpted Books on Pedestal, with Inscriptions from Bethune's Last Will and Testament
Photographed on Sept. 9, 2021, by Eric Breitenbach at the News-Journal Center, Daytona Beach**

Engraved in gold letters on the base of the statue are these words: "FLORIDA – Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, 1875-1955, 'Invest in the human soul. Who knows, it may be a diamond in the rough.'"



Base of Bethune Statue with Inscription of Bethune Quotation

Photographed on Sept. 9, 2021, by Eric Breitenbach at the News-Journal Center, Daytona Beach

The statue of Mary McLeod Bethune was temporarily displayed in Daytona Beach at Daytona State College's News-Journal Center in October 2021, and made a brief appearance in Bethune's hometown of Mayesville, South Carolina in December 2021. The statue was then moved to Washington DC. On July 13, 2022, the statue was unveiled in the Capitol Building's National Statuary Hall. On August 18, 2022, a bronze replica of the marble statue (also financed by the Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune Statuary Fund, Inc.), was unveiled in Daytona Beach's Bethune Pavilion, located a few blocks east of Bethune-Cookman University and in the northern portion of the Riverfront Esplanade.



Bronze statue of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, Bethune Pavilion, Riverfront Esplanade, Daytona Beach

(Courtesy of Halifax Media Group, publisher of the Daytona Beach News-Journal)

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***Randy Jaye** has recently researched and nominated 4 properties that have been successfully added onto the National Register of Historic Places. He is the author of the recent books: *Flagler County, Florida: A Centennial History* and *Perseverance: Episodes of Black History from the Rural South* and has written many articles that have been published in historical journals. He earned both an MA degree and a BA degree from the California State University. Realizing that Florida has the oldest European-influenced history in the United States, he is committed to researching, exploring and writing about its fascinating and important diversity and how it has played key roles in influencing the development and establishing the identity of the nation.

