

#EmancipateCleveland is a grassroots collective of concerned citizens working to create a more equitable Cleveland, Tennessee. We believe that equity in Cleveland means fair and impartial treatment and representation for all. Working toward that diversity and equity means giving our city's Black community respect and, most importantly, a voice. The message that Black lives matter is central to these goals, but we are not affiliated with the organization Black Lives Matter.

Every night at 6:30 p.m., excluding Sundays, #EmancipateCleveland organizes demonstrators across the street from the Confederate statue found at Ocoee and 8th Streets. Our group is made up almost entirely of local citizens. We are demonstrating to promote awareness of our Black community and ask that the statue be removed from its current location.

In cities across the country, officials are recognizing the pain these statues are causing – and have caused – since they were erected in stealthy support of Jim Crow laws, and they are coming down. Protestors in some cities are taking matters into their own hands and destroying them.

Destroying this statue is not #EmancipateCleveland's goal. We are asking for a compromise. We would like to see it moved to a museum or cemetery, where it can better serve in the proper context of history.

There are many outspoken in our community who are against #EmancipateCleveland and our demonstrations. Most are individuals who think this is a brand new problem because they have no experience in driving past the statue and seeing a monument glorifying the men and women who bought and sold their great-grandparents as property.

Even more telling is that those in protest of our demonstrations at the statue never mention protecting the statue's current location. Instead, they spend their time shouting threats, racial slurs and bigoted rhetoric in an attempt to incite violence.

County officials have encouraged these behaviors. A former county commissioner with a long police record of theft and assault has even publicly called for violence against us.

Every night, those Confederates protesting against our demonstrators walk through the parking lot to take photos of our license plates. They follow our demonstrators home. They drive by our homes in the middle of the night and honk horns that play "Dixie." They commit vandalism in our yards.

This statue is a place that showcases the worst of Cleveland's bigotry and hatred. In the late 1940s, local papers reported the burning of crosses at the statue as part of an initiation ritual for a local Ku Klux Klan society. And today, protests try in vain to silence our Black community with fear and terror to protect the Confederate values of white supremacy.

The United Daughters of the Confederacy, the racist organization who built the statue in our Union town, want us to believe their false narrative of the Lost Cause. They paint the picture that slaves were happy and enjoyed serving their masters instead of the reality of bondage, chains, beatings and rape. They tell us this statue represents soldiers from both sides, even when the statue itself explicitly states that is not the truth. They pretend the Civil War is distant history, when in fact, the last person to receive a U.S. government pension from the Civil War died only six weeks ago.

The Confederacy and the statues dedicated to it were always about white supremacy. We cannot allow the UDC to continue to whitewash our history.

Our heritage, good and bad, must not be erased by them.

We are grateful to Mayor Kevin Brooks' willingness to meet with members of #EmancipateCleveland, and to councilman Bill Estes for his interest in finding a peaceful resolution. It is our hope that working with them, and other leaders in our city, will create result in opportunities to give our Black community a voice at the table – strengthening our great city with spirit and diversity.

Moving the statue will not end racism in Cleveland.

The statue's relocation will, however, send the clear message to the 3,500 Black residents in our community that local officials hear their pain. It will tell tourists who come to our city that we will no longer tolerate a prominently placed monument to white supremacy. It

will inform incoming students to our local colleges and university that we do not glorify the anti-American fight to leave the United States and keep Blacks as slaves. Finally, it will tell companies and industries seeking to bring their business to Cleveland that we will not allow an idol to exist for the racists in our community to worship.