

TRAVEL

Does a monument tell the whole story? In Pawtucket, R.I., they're asking that and other hard questions

A statue of William Blackstone was close to being erected when concerns were raised about who and what it celebrates. Now residents have a chance to reflect on the region's history and what should happen next.

By **Ellen Albanese** Globe correspondent, Updated May 13, 2021, 10:00 a.m.



The sculpture of William Blackstone by Peruko Ccopacatty was slated to be installed on this site at Roosevelt and Exchange streets in Pawtucket, R.I. BETA GROUP INC.

PAWTUCKET, R.I. – The national scrutiny of memorial statues and tourist attractions is playing out here in the Blackstone Valley. A modernistic, stainless-steel statue of William Blackstone, considered the first English settler in current-day Rhode Island, was all set to be hoisted on a pedestal by the river that bears his name, when Richard Kazarian, a Pawtucket native with a doctorate in American history from Brown University, said, “Stop. Are we sure this is what we want to celebrate? Is what we’re saying here true?” He questioned whether it was right to be celebrating a figure so closely associated with the forces that led to the near-complete destruction of

Native life in the valley. A brief reference to the fate of the region's indigenous ancestors at the base of a 14-foot-tall statue of Blackstone, he said, was inappropriate and had to be rethought. The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council and the city took Kazarian's concerns to heart, put the project on hold, and invited area residents to participate in a virtual forum about how the work should proceed.



Robert Billington, president of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council. DANA SILES PHOTOGRAPHER



Richard Kazarian, local historian. MARC MATZ

We talked with Kazarian and Robert Billington, president of the tourism council, about the statue, the narrative, and the role of tourism organizations in presenting an accurate picture of a region's history.

Q. What is the overriding purpose of a monument in a community? What should it say, and to whom?

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Kazarian: To tell a true story. We haven't yet told our story ourselves; it's been told to us. We don't get to put up monuments in Pawtucket often, and when we do it's often, sadly, to memorialize soldiers lost to war. This is a big opportunity and a big responsibility to construct something that will speak to our values and insights long into the future.

Billington: To identify, inform, and educate. The Blackstone name is everywhere, but many people don't know anything about the region's namesake. People ask, "Why is it called that? Are there black stones in the river?" Tourism begins in the neighborhood. Your neighborhood has to understand, value, and respect its own resources. If you can get the place right, holistically developed, visitors will come.

Q. Do you see parallels between this statue and the recent push to eliminate Confederate monuments and to rewrite the story of tourist attractions that whitewash the history of slavery?





The 14-foot stainless steel sculpture of William Blackstone astride his white bull was done by Peruko Ccopacatty, a Peruvian-born sculptor based in Rhode Island. BETA GROUP INC.

Kazarian: There are certainly parallels. Where and how monuments are erected is significant; many Confederate statues were erected in the 1920s when the Ku Klux Klan was at the height of its powers. They were part of the attempt to reestablish racial supremacy. This monument presents us with an opportunity to address the heretofore unaddressed.

Billington: It was hard to find information about Blackstone. We had a sense of a gentle person, an educated person, a minister, and our intent was to include Native Americans in the icons at the base of the statue and in the narrative panels. But I see the larger context because Richard has asked us to look at it. Twenty years ago, we probably would have proceeded with the original plan. Richard stopped us in our tracks and got us thinking: Are we doing the right thing?

Q. Is it possible to find any historical figure whose ethics we would approve of today?

Kazarian: One of the most common criticisms of an expanded discussion of historical monuments — that we are superimposing 21st-century morality upon a different time — is misguided. In every period of American history, there are always those brave few who stood up in opposition, often risking personal danger, but their

voices aren't known. We shouldn't be so quick to flatter ourselves into believing in our 21st-century moral superiority or, worse yet, use this argument for not asking long-unanswered questions.

Billington: We haven't found any stories about Blackstone that make us feel uneasy. We're not saying he is our hero. We're saying he did these things — horticulture, ministering. This valley has wrapped itself around his name, and we just want to explain who he was.

Q. Why has it been so difficult to get Native American voices on the forum?

Kazarian: Since Native ancestors are not here today to offer their views, it's on us to respect their lives and ultimately their bravery. We can't just say we proposed the idea and didn't hear any objections. That doesn't exempt us from getting things right.

Billington: We need to do more with the Native American story, but it has been difficult to get native voices. We've reached out to tribal leaders in this area to make sure that we're asking the right questions. We've been trying, and we're not done yet.

Q. What role should a tourism council play in making sure that it paints a historically accurate and culturally sensitive picture of the area it represents?

Kazarian: The full story is always so much more compelling. While this statue was never meant to disguise the past, there's not a hint of complexity in it. It really is reflective of the simplicity with which story has been told. The tourism council and the city deserve high praise for how they are dealing with the matter.

Billington: It's our job to reveal the story. We don't make it up. We don't varnish it. If we find that it's not correct, then we change it. Ultimately, this is another opportunity to tell the story of the Blackstone Valley.

Area residents are invited to add their comments to the online forum at

blackstonevalleytourismcouncil.org/kazarian/

Interview was edited and condensed. Ellen Albanese can be reached at ellen.albanese@gmail.com.

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