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December 20, 2019

The Honorable Ralph S. Northam
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 1475
Richmond, VA 23218

Dear Governor Northam,

We write regarding the Commonwealth of Virginia's statues within the National Statuary Hall Collection in the United States Capitol Building. The National Statuary Hall Collection consists of two statues donated by each state, with 100 statues total in the collection, that honor notable persons in a state's history. Currently, Virginia's two statues in the collection depict George Washington and Robert E. Lee.

The statue of Lee, which depicts him in his Confederate uniform, was donated by the Commonwealth during the period from 1900 to the 1930s when dozens of Confederate monuments were erected across the country. These statues aimed to rewrite Lee's reputation from that of a cruel slave owner and Confederate General to portraying him as a kind man and reluctant war hero who selflessly served his home state of Virginia.

The statue in the National Statuary Hall Collection is placed in the U.S. Capitol Crypt, a prominent location that is displayed to almost every tour group that visits the U.S. Capitol, and as such serves as a prevalent reminder of Virginia's disturbing racial legacy. This history began when enslaved Africans landed at Point Comfort in August 1619 and led to 550,000 people being enslaved in the Commonwealth by 1860. Richmond served as the capital of the Confederate States of America, which seceded from the Union for the explicit purpose of protecting the institution of slavery. Following the Civil War, the Commonwealth enacted "black codes," laws aimed at restricting African Americans' freedoms and ensuring that they continued to work for low wages. Despite being placed under Army occupation during Reconstruction, many of these restrictive codes remained intact across the South for years.

These laws set the groundwork for Jim Crow laws, which, following the Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, mandated racial segregation in the Commonwealth and restricted African Americans' voting rights. The Supreme Court later overturned *Plessy* with *Brown v. Board of Education* and consequently ordered the integration of schools. Following this decision, however, the Commonwealth led the Massive Resistance by passing legislation to prevent the desegregation of public schools, including a law shutting down public schools that attempted to integrate. The ramifications of this institutionalized racism are still seen today through racial disparities in income, health care, schooling, and many other areas in the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth still has a long way to go to address these disparities. Overall, the incomes of black Virginians are significantly less than those of white Virginians even when comparing individuals who are employed full-time and have the same education level. Similarly, black Virginians experience higher levels of unemployment even when compared to whites with the same education level. In education itself, white Virginians are significantly more likely to earn a high school or college degree. These disparities

continue when examining the health care industry. For example, black women are more than twice as likely to die within a year of giving birth as white women in the Commonwealth.

Despite this disturbing past, there were also many prominent Virginians who bravely chose to fight for justice and equality. Nat Turner, a slave in Virginia, fought for his freedom by leading one of the most notable slave rebellions in United States history. Following emancipation, Booker T. Washington, an emancipated slave who is recognized as one of the most important thinkers of the 19th century, founded Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) and served as an adviser to Presidents Roosevelt and Taft. Maggie Walker, the daughter of an emancipated slave and a strong civil rights advocate, was the first African American woman to charter a bank in the United States.

During the Jim Crow era, while some Virginians were leading the fight against school integration, two notable Virginians, Oliver Hill and Barbara Johns, were at the forefront of fighting for equality in education. In 1951, Barbara Johns organized a walkout of her African American school to protest the unequal facility conditions and overcrowding. Shortly after, she reached out to attorney Oliver Hill, who was himself a Virginian and an NAACP lawyer. They filed suit in a case that would become one of the five cases in the landmark decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, ultimately overturning separate but equal laws and desegregating schools across the United States.

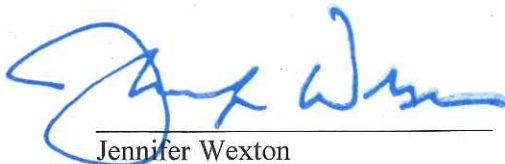
As Virginians, we have a responsibility to not only learn from but also confront our history. As part of this responsibility, we must strive for a more complete telling of history by raising up the voices, stories, and memories of minorities and people of color. In doing so, we should consider what monuments we can add to acknowledge the horrors of slavery, expose the injustices of institutional racism, and honor those who dedicated their lives to fighting for equality.

There are countless commendable Virginians who would better represent our Commonwealth in the U.S. Capitol than a Confederate General, including the Virginians mentioned above. To that end, we urge you to include the replacement of the Robert E. Lee statue in the U.S. Capitol as part of your agenda for the 2020 Legislative Session.

As outlined in the attached *Procedures and Guidelines for Replacement of Statues in the National Statuary Hall Collection* by the Architect of the Capitol, the current replacement procedure calls for authorizing legislation to be passed through the General Assembly and signed into law by the Governor. The request must then be communicated to the Architect of the Capitol. Several southern states have recently utilized this process to replace their state's statues in the collection; Alabama and Florida have each removed statues honoring Confederate military officials, and Florida and Arkansas are adding statues depicting civil rights activists Mary McLeod Bethune and Daisy Bates.

Our offices are ready to work with you to move Virginia forward.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Wexton
Member of Congress



A. Donald McEachin
Member of Congress