N.O. removes 1st of 4 monuments

STATUE A MARKER OF BATTLE OF LIBERTY PLACE

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The removal of New Orleans' monument to the Battle of Liberty Place under the cover of darkness early Monday morning marks a turning point in the nearly two-year debate over the fate of four Jim Crow-era statues.

Three other monuments targeted by Mayor Mitch Landrieu — memorializing Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and P.G.T. Beauregard and Confederate President Jefferson Davis — also are scheduled to come down, though the timing and other details of the removal are closely guarded secrets.

The dismantling of the Liberty Place obelisk came hours before a federal judge dismissed a lawsuit by groups seeking to keep the four monuments in place. The case had held up the removal for more than a year before judges on the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled recently that the city could proceed with its plans.

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Of the four, the Liberty Place monument was widely seen as the most objectionable, and Landrieu explicitly described it that way. The 1891 monument commemorated a violent 1874 uprising by a local militia known as the White League, which fought with members of New Orleans’ biracial police force as it ousted the state’s “carpetbagger” Reconstruction-era government for several days before President Ulysses S. Grant sent in federal troops.

A plaque later added to the monument noted the failure of the rebellion but cast it as a part of re-establishing white supremacy in the state.

While the Landrieu administration has not provided significant details about the monuments’ removal, including when contractors are working on the project, who is funding it, the final fate of the statues and what will replace them, the mayor said at a news conference a few hours after the White League marker came down that the process would be wrapped up quickly.

“It will be sooner rather than later, but it could be any time in the future,” Landrieu said.

“We will not be sharing those details now or in the future, but let me be clear: We will not be deterred.”

The lack of notice for the work and the fact it began about 1:30 a.m. upset groups on both sides of the debate, with even those who have fought to have the monuments taken down calling it a “cowardly” move.

Malcolm Suber, one of the organizers of Take ‘Em Down NOLA, showed up midway through the removal. While he said he was glad the monument, one of about 100 statues and place markers in the city, was coming down, he had called the statue “nuisance” that promoted racial discord because of its likeness to a movement known as the Lost Cause, which sought to rehabilitate the image of the Confederacy after the Civil War and to re-establish white dominance in Southern states.

That led to six months of public debate and hearings that culminated in a 6-1 City Council vote to declare the monuments “nuisances” that promoted racial discord because of their ties to a movement known as the Lost Cause, which sought to rehabilitate the image of the Confederacy after the Civil War and to re-establish white dominance in Southern states.

The removal was delayed, however, as the city found itself tied up in court battles that lasted until earlier this year, when the 5th Circuit ruled the city could move forward while a trial on the monument backers’ lawsuit played out.

That case also was resolved Monday, when U.S. District Judge Carl Barbier dismissed claims made by several groups led by the Monumental Task Committee, ruling the plaintiffs had not shown they could succeed on the merits. Among their arguments was that the committee should have a say in what happened to the monuments because it had done work over the years to clean and restore them.

Landrieu was not spotted at the removal itself, and other city officials there were not allowed to comment to the media, leaving the city’s official comments to a release issued two hours after the process began and then Landrieu’s news conference.

“Our past is marked by racial divisions. Today we are moving to a place of healing,” Landrieu said.

That event was held at the police memorial in front of NOPD headquarters, a deliberate choice by the administration to accentuate the fact that the White League killed members of the city’s biracial police force during its rebellion.

“The four the we will remove, this is perhaps the most blatant affront to the values that make New Orleans and America strong today,” Landrieu said of the Battle of Liberty Place monument.

“We will no longer allow the Confederacy to literally be put in the heart of our city. The removal of these statues sends a clear message, an unequivocal message to the people of our nation that our city celebrates our diversity,” he added.

Jeff Nowak and Matt Sledge contributed to this report.