



The Death Penalty is Another Confederate Monument We Must Tear Down *By Henderson Hill*

Right now, our nation is in a moment of reckoning with our criminal punishment system. We are finally seeing clearly what should have been obvious long ago: The system has its knee on the necks of Black people.

In North Carolina, as we begin a long-overdue conversation about the future of police and prisons, we must confront the punishment that sits at the top of that system, condoning all its other cruelties — the death penalty.

When citizens have acclimated to the state strapping a person to a gurney and killing them in front of an audience, it becomes harder to shock them. The death penalty teaches a cruel and inhumane lesson: As long as we brand people criminals, we can kill them.

Meanwhile, there is absolutely no evidence that capital punishment enhances public safety or prevents crime. Instead, it creates more violence and pain, more parentless children and grieving families. I've seen this trauma up close as an attorney representing people on death row.

It is time for us to examine not just the daily cruelties of today's death penalty, but to see its true nature. And to understand that, we must understand its history.

This report lays bare what too many people, lulled by the myth of a post-racial society, have allowed themselves to forget. The death penalty's history is inseparable from our history of slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration. Even as the number of executions and death sentences declines, it remains a powerful symbol of white supremacy.

When we open our eyes to the history of capital punishment, the conclusion becomes inescapable. The death penalty is just one more Confederate monument that we must tear down.

Henderson Hill was the founder and first director of the Center for Death Penalty Litigation. He previously worked as a public defender in Washington, DC, a partner at the civil rights law firm, Ferguson Stein Chambers, and as director of the Federal Defenders of Western NC. He served as founding director of the 8th Amendment Project, and currently serves as Senior Counsel at the [ACLU Capital Punishment Project](#), and co-director of the initiative [RedressNC](#).