

British Protesters Throw Statue of Slave Trader Into Bristol Harbor

The event has ignited a debate over Edward Colston's place in the English city's history



Protesters push a statue of 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston into Bristol's harbor. (Photo by Giulia Spadafora / NurPhoto via Getty Images)

By [Nora McGreevy](#)

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On Sunday, a group of protesters pulled an 18-foot-tall statue of 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston down from its pedestal in Bristol, England. As the bronze likeness lay on the ground, its face obscured by red paint, the crowd converged: One protester mirrored the chokehold Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin used on [George Floyd](#), [pressing his knee](#) against the statue's neck; others danced atop the felled sculpture. Soon, the group rolled Colston's statue on its side and pushed it into the nearby harbor, where it landed with a splash punctuated by onlookers' cheers.

[Videos](#) of the dramatic event quickly went viral on social media, igniting a debate over the future of controversial British monuments as a [similar reckoning](#) unfolds across the Atlantic.

Born in Bristol, a port city in southwest England, in 1636, Colston made his fortune with the [Royal African Company](#) (RAC). As historian William Pettigrew writes in the book [Freedom's Debt](#), the RAC was responsible for shipping more enslaved people to the Americas than any other entity involved in the transatlantic slave trade.

As Suyin Haynes reports for [Time magazine](#), [estimates](#) suggest that Colston transported 84,500 kidnapped African men, women and children during his tenure as the company's deputy governor. Almost 20,000 of these enslaved individuals died on the grueling voyage across the Atlantic. Colston later worked with the South Seas Company, where he oversaw the enslavement and transport of more than 15,000 people.

[Multiple institutions](#) in Bristol are named after the slave trader. Most prominent is the Colston Hall concert venue, which was built in 1867. Bristol Music Trust, which operates the venue, announced in 2017 that it would change the hall's name. Now, amid widespread protests against police brutality and [systemic racism](#), the trust has announced that the hall's name will be changed by fall 2020, reports Laura Snapes for the [Guardian](#).

An estimated 10,000 Black Live Matters protesters marched in Bristol on Sunday, according to [local authorities](#). The activists who threw Colston's statue into the harbor may have been inspired by the similar [removal of Confederate monuments](#) across the American South, notes Mark Landler for the [New York Times](#).

For many Brits, the act was a triumphant, symbolic move.

“That statue represents years of oppression. It represents years of hurt, and just lots of hatred and emotion that's built up inside of us, that we've internalized for years,” protester Elliot McLean told [BBC News](#). “That coming down today, hopefully signifies change.”

In a [statement](#) posted on Twitter, the [International Slavery Museum](#) said that it does not condone criminal damage. Still, the Liverpool institution added, “The representation of Edward Colston was highly contentious and offensive to many, and in bringing him down, it is important to note that we are not erasing history, but instead making history.”

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, meanwhile, claimed the protests had been “subverted by thuggery,” according to the *Times*. Johnson’s home secretary, Priti Patel, told [Sky News](#), “I think that is utterly disgraceful.”

Bristol Mayor Marvin Rees said he felt no “sense of loss” about the statue’s fate, reports [BBC News](#).

“I can’t and won’t pretend the statue of a slave trader in a city I was born and grew up in wasn’t an affront to me and people like me,” explained Rees, whose parents are Jamaican and British. “People in Bristol who don’t want that statue in the middle of the city came together and it is my job to unite, hear those voices and hold those truths together for people for who that statue is a personal affront.”

Rees told BBC News that the statue will likely be recovered from the harbor “at some point” and [placed in a museum](#) alongside protesters’ posters. As Gareth Harris reports for the [Art Newspaper](#), British artist [Hew Locke](#) has argued that the statue should be displayed on its side to subvert its visual power.



[Bristol City Council](#) @BristolCouncil

We have collected all the signs that were laid in the city after yesterday's [#BlackLivesMatter](#) protest so we can preserve them for display in the [@mshedbristol](#)



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On Tuesday, more than 1,000 people inspired by videos of the Colston's statue fall gathered at Oxford University to call for the removal of a sculpture of imperialist [Cecil Rhodes](#), according to [Reuters](#). Rhodes—perhaps best known as the namesake of the [Rhodes Scholarship](#)—was a 19th-century businessman who espoused [white supremacist](#) ideals.

Critics argue that Rhodes [paved the way for South African apartheid](#) during his stint as prime minister of British-controlled Cape Colony. In 2015, activists at Cape Town University launched the [Rhodes Must Fall movement](#), which demanded the removal of a sculpture of Rhodes and called for the decolonization of the education system across South Africa.

Organizers of the Oxford-based Rhodes Must Fall campaign hope to use this opportunity to remove colonial iconography from the university's grounds, as well as

reckon with institutionalized racism and inequality at the school, according to a [statement](#).

“These monuments are put up to revere these figures, and if we say we want a non-racist society, of course we have to get rid of them,” [Kehinde Andrews](#), a professor of black studies at Birmingham City University, tells the *New York Times*. “Statues are not about history; statues are about a certain version of history.”

About Nora McGreevy

Nora McGreevy is a freelance journalist based in South Bend, Indiana. Her work has appeared in *Wired*, *Washingtonian*, the *Boston Globe*, *South Bend Tribune*, the *New York Times* and more. She can be reached through her website, noramcgreevy.com.

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