

In 2023, Lafayette Parish will celebrate our Bicentennial.

It has been nearly two-hundred years since we were chartered by the Louisiana Legislature in 1823.

Two years earlier, in 1821, Jean Mouton, a wealthy planter donated a parcel of land to the community known as Vermilionville, for a Courthouse, and a Cathedral.

Jean Mouton became known as the founder of Vermilionville, that became the city of Lafayette in 1884.

His son Alexander would become a United States Senator and later, the first Democratic Governor of the State of Louisiana. Alexander Mouton would serve as Chairman of Louisiana's Secession Convention, in 1861.

One of Alexander Mouton's eleven children, Alfred, became a military leader, a confederate general. There is a State Historic Monument where Alfred Mouton died in battle and was buried, in Mansfield, Louisiana, in 1864.

In 1874, General Alfred Mouton was moved to the Cemetery of St. John the Evangelist here in Lafayette where he rests today, near his father and grandfather.

The Mouton family founded our city and were pivotal in founding our parish. This is our history. To understand. To learn from. To heal from.

Today, the legacy of this family as owners of slaves, and particularly the statue of General Mouton downtown, is a source of significant conversation.

Some of this conversation is thoughtful and serious. Some of this conversation is rooted in mutual respect, and a desire for redemption

and reconciliation between our peoples. Some of it is rooted in how to constructively move our community forward.

But some of the conversation we are seeing is not. It is vulgar, threatening, and offensive.

Rather than helping us come to terms with our history, it is an impediment to mutual respect, redemption and reconciliation.

The violence and destruction we have seen across our nation seems to be rooted in promoting racial division and rending the fabric of our society until it is unrecognizable.

We have successfully avoided this kind of mayhem in our city and parish. For the most part, our conversation has been respectful, constructive and civil. Despite threats, we've had several spirited protests and demonstrations without major incident so far.

I am engaged in a conversation that includes the key stakeholders who have been a part of this history. I have met with Bishop Deshotel to discuss the role of the Catholic Church in our history and helping bring about reconciliation today.

I am meeting with our pastors on the north side of our parish – and pastors on the south side of our parish to discuss the role of our communities of faith in bringing about mutual understanding.

I have met with leadership of the United Daughters of the Confederacy who erected the Mouton statue nearly 100 years ago, to discuss how best to protect this monument from illegal destruction or defacement.

In many ways, this is a problem of politics and government. While there is a permanent injunction against moving the statue resulting

from a settlement and final judgment 40 years ago – circumstances have changed.

Legally, the Judge has discretion to alter the agreement reached in 1980, in order to protect public safety, and the statue from destruction.

At its root, however, this is a spiritual challenge. This is a test of our most deeply held beliefs and values. It's a question of who we are and who we want to be as a people.

If this statue was simply a testament to General Mouton's valor in battle, it might be less objectionable.

However, this specific statue was erected in 1922, at a time known as the "Jim Crow" era, when black people were systematically denied their basic rights. It was a time that glorified and preserved the idea that people of color are somehow less than others. That they are not equal.

As a Catholic, I know that all God's children are created equal and should enjoy equal rights to life, liberty and pursuing happiness.

As an attorney, I know that achieving the promise of our laws guaranteeing equality requires that they be faithfully upheld.

As a combat veteran, I have seen and experienced the intense devotion that binds those who would give their lives in battle for the ideas, principles and values they believe in.

As a father, I am committed to a community in which my children and all children will succeed or fail due to their effort and the content of their character, rather than the color of their skin.

As a Republican, I am proud that my party was founded in 1860 on opposition to slavery as an institution.

I am proud that my party's first President, Abraham Lincoln, abolished the sinful institution of slavery in the United States and fought a bloody civil war to preserve the Union. That Republicans passed the 14th and 15th Amendments, establishing equal protection and extending due process protections to the states. That Republicans were the driver for passing women's suffrage in 1920. That President Ronald Reagan established Martin Luther King Day as a National Holiday. And that President Trump signed the First Step Act -- landmark criminal justice reform legislation addressing serious issues of structural racism in federal sentencing.

My party, from its beginning, has stood for equality.

Ultimately, this is not a Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal issue. It's a question of what is best for the long-term future of our community.

This statue is a part of our history. That cannot and should not be denied. But we have an opportunity today, to make history.

This downtown intersection is an important gateway into the heart of the city of Lafayette.

We want visitors to experience the vibrant optimism and determination of our people when they come here. We should honestly ask ourselves whether this statue is the best symbol for that.

I believe it is time for us, as a community, to put down the burdens of 1922, so that we will be able to successfully shoulder the challenges and opportunities of 2022 and beyond.

Since taking the Oath of Office in January, I have thought about this issue at length. I have prayed for wisdom and insight. I have thought deeply about how to best respect our past, while embracing a vibrant, robust vision for our future. This is not a decision made in haste, but rather out of conviction and dedication to my Oath of Office.

We will not fall prey to the madness that is sweeping cities across our nation. We will make our decisions thoughtfully, with an eye to what is the best way to understand and display our history, and to do what is best for our people and our future.

We will respect the rule of law, protecting our public monuments from destruction, defacing or desecration.

We will honor the sacrifice of those who have fought in all of our nation's wars.

We will honor those individuals and families who founded and shaped our community, placing their contributions in the proper historical perspective.

We will honor and respect the work of the dedicated men and women in law enforcement who place their lives in danger every day, to keep us safe.

We will not tolerate efforts to divide our community by race, using incendiary rhetoric to inflame passions and resentment.

We will work for an inclusive community, committed to the equality of all our people, and ensuring that we're all treated fairly no matter where we live in Lafayette Parish.

We will work to ensure the Statue of General Mouton finally rests at its most appropriate place – offering proper historical context for his life and legacy.

We will work conscientiously to free the public space in front of the Old City Hall, for activities appropriate to our community in 2022.

The time has come for me to clarify my position. I will instruct the legal department to take all steps available to see that this monument is removed. At the same time, I will ask the court for permission to allow us to protect the Mouton Statue from destruction.

I will ask the City Council to pass a resolution in support of these actions.

We face historic challenges here in our city and our parish in the wake of the COVID-19 public health emergency and the decline in energy prices. Our response to these challenges is complicated by the confusion and counterproductive infighting we are seeing across our nation.

I am determined that we will come together as a people. We are one parish. We share one future.

We all have a right to be treated fairly, no matter where we live in Lafayette Parish. We are strongest when we speak with one voice.

Once we accept this profound truth, we will all finish our first 200 years with a strong, unshakable foundation on which to build a safer, more prosperous future – for our next 200 years.

Thank you, and God Bless You.