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# Addressing Questions of Hometown History: Eta Phi Panel on Memorials

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## **ADDRESSING QUESTIONS OF HOMETOWN HISTORY: ETA PHI PANEL ON MEMORIALS**

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**By Mary Goode**

Controversial debates are not a new phenomenon; however, with the rise of personal technology and social media they take on a fierceness and immediacy in everyday life for many modern Americans. The year of 2017 featured such widespread controversial debates—specifically over the thousands of Confederate statues and monuments spread across the South. In August 2017, riots erupted across the contiguous United States. One particular riot in Charlottesville, Virginia, proved once again that debates have the ability to turn violent at an alarming speed. The issue did not bypass Harding’s hometown of Searcy; a statue honoring Confederate veterans outside city hall drew controversy in light of the larger arguments across the nation. Instead of ignoring the spirit of violence and division running rampant through its city and country, Harding University’s Eta Phi chapter of Phi Alpha Theta elected to face the issue of monuments and how people remember the past head on.

On October 10, 2017, a panel of five faculty members and guests of the university addressed the issue and debate over the existence and preservation of statues and other monuments. The first topic addressed was that of historical preservation and the federal government. This subject was addressed by associate professor of art Dr. Sarah Wilhoit. Dr. Wilhoit explained the history of the national register, what its purpose is, the type of monuments and buildings that are placed on the register, the criteria for being recognized, and the five types of properties that are typically place on the national register. Secondly, a faculty member from the Spanish department, Professor Michelle Coizman, spoke on the issue of remembering Columbus. Professor Coizman noted that different nations have decided to remember Columbus in a variety of ways, but what remains most important is that they had the option to choose.

Dr. Shawn Fisher from the department of history spoke specifically on the confederate statues and monuments placed around the United States and the history of their constructions and their meanings.

Dr. Fisher noted that today's society must remember the time frames and positions (funerary, singular soldiers, battlefield monuments,) in which these types of monuments are placed. Additionally, Dr. Heath Carpenter from the English department discussed the stories behind the monuments. Noting that monuments hold inherently complex narratives, Dr. Carpenter posed two questions: "whose truth is being told?" and "whose story is untold?" Professor Mac Sandlin from the Bible department spoke on the biblical perspective of monuments. Professor Sandlin noted that society must be careful of their use of symbols, to not place admiration where admiration is not due, and that we must continue to be examples of Christ's love—even when the circumstances make it difficult.

This panel, composed of insightful and discerning members, not only discussed and investigated the problems that surround memorials, but also touched on how modern society views them. Such subjects are typically sensitive—often igniting arguments that in some cases lead to violence. However, when they are approached in an academic, respectful, and encouraging manner such conversations are less frightening and more encouraging than once presumed to be. The endeavor proved stimulating, productive, and rewarding for the Eta Phi chapter in its goal to promote open-minded historical awareness in modern contexts.