

If It's So Hard, Why Talk About It? American Slavery in History and Memory

A Public Lecture in Honor of James Oliver Horton
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It seems that much of the news today involves reports of racial conflicts and controversies. There are the activities of self-proclaimed neo-Nazis and white supremacists, demonstrations by Black Lives Matter activists, and National Football League players protesting police brutality by kneeling for the national anthem. Controversies over the display of Confederate flags and the existence of statues of Confederate heroes evoke memories of the Civil War. They remind us, once again, of the importance of slavery in American history, of our shameful past and the nation's fundamental contradiction between slavery and its professed commitment to freedom and equality. They should also remind us of the long-lasting rationalizations developed to attempt to reconcile that contradiction, rationalizations that labeled blacks as dangerous and inferior.

Why does this matter? Isn't it just "ancient history?" Of course, slavery lasted nearly 250 years, or 12 generations, in British colonial America and the United States, but it ended more than 150 years ago. Can't African Americans "just get over it?" many people ask. To address this question, I'd like to consider the consequences of this history by relating some of the story of James Oliver Horton's and my research and writing in African American history and our ventures into public history.

For individuals, we know that history has consequences. We accept the necessity for psychologists to investigate family histories, past relationships and traumas in order to promote understanding and better mental health. So, too, a nation's past shapes its present and future. The historian's task, then, is to uncover the past and interpret its meaning. We do this out of curiosity and because the past is interesting, but we also do this to illuminate the present and help create a better, more stable future. The task of the public historian is especially important and sometimes especially difficult, since the public has a great desire for "feel good," celebratory history.

And there is much to celebrate in African American history. We can celebrate black Revolutionary War patriots: Crispus Attucks, called the first martyr of the American Revolution, who died in the Boston Massacre, the black minutemen at Lexington and Concord, or Peter Salem, who was among several blacks cited for bravery at the Battle of Bunker Hill. We can celebrate the more than 5,000 Africans and African American patriots who fought in the American Revolution for freedom, America's and their own. We can recognize the role blacks played in the Revolution that began the end of slavery in the North, not only by fighting in the war, but also by reminding the patriots of their principles. Their petitions to colonial legislatures in the 1770s, like one in Boston in 1773, called upon colonials' declarations about Christianity and human rights. In this petition, enslaved men congratulated the legislators on their efforts to "free themselves from slavery [which] gave us, who are in that deplorable state, a high degree of satisfaction. We expect great things," they said, "from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow-men to enslave them." After the war, black men and women continued their campaign with legal suits for freedom, arguing that slavery violated the Massachusetts constitution's promise of freedom and equality. This is all part of a great success story that in the eighteenth century culminated in the immediate

abolition of legal slavery in some New England states, the initiation of gradual emancipation in other northern states, and the prohibition of slavery in the Northwest territory.¹

We can also celebrate the occasions when the system of justice in America worked for African Americans, as was the case for a woman named Isabella, who was born into slavery in New York State just after the Revolution and whose mother was sold away from her when Isabella was only about ten years old. One day, after New York's emancipation law had passed but before it went into effect, Isabella, then age thirty, came home to find that her five-year-old son, Peter, had been sold to a new owner and bought as a wedding present for a couple moving to Alabama. The couple took Peter to Alabama, even though the law explicitly forbade moving an about-to-be-freed slave out of the state. When Isabella complained to her mistress, she was told not to raise such a "fuss," since she still had three children to care for. Isabella then sued the owner, who, facing a long prison term and a heavy fine, retrieved Peter from Alabama but did not return him to his mother. Peter had been badly beaten in Alabama and was afraid to go against his owner's wishes. Face to face with Isabella after more legal action, he denied she was his mother. Mother and son were finally reunited about a year after he had been sold, and justice triumphed. Isabella reported being so angry and brokenhearted by the damage done to her son and to their relationship, however, that she dedicated her life to the antislavery cause, eventually changing her name to Sojourner Truth.²

There were many touching and inspiring stories under slavery, but the fundamental contradiction still remained. Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the sacred words in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" and entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," owned more than 150 slaves at the time. When in 1820 the Missouri Compromise attempted to balance the number of slave states and the number of free states, Jefferson expressed his fears, calling it a "fire bell in the night." He believed slavery was wrong but feared black anger and retribution and so could see no way to do away with it. He likened the nation's predicament to holding a "wolf by the ears . . . we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice," he said, was "in one scale, and self-preservation in the other."³

The problem was how to reconcile the contradiction—how to keep the profitable, and brutal, system of racial slavery and yet maintain a belief in freedom and equality. The answer was rationalization, rationalization that would demonstrate that slavery was necessary and that Africans and African Americans were best suited for slavery. What developed were two basic rationalizations. First, enslaved black people were dangerous and angry, especially black men. The incidence of slave revolts and rebellions was evidence that they needed to be controlled. These beliefs eventually led to a virtual police state in the South. Second, black people were inferior—childlike, lazy, lacking ambition, and not intelligent. Hence, they needed to be cared for in a system like slavery. Also, families could be separated, since blacks lacked the family feelings that whites exhibited. From this developed the belief in slavery as a benign system, where the plantation was like a family with singing and dancing "happy slaves" who were loyal to their masters.

Well-respected prominent historians perpetuated these beliefs. One popular textbook published in 1948 and used well into the 1950s and 1960s declared, "slaves had snug cabins to live in, plenty of food to eat and work that was not too hard for them to do . . . Most of the slaves seemed happy and contented." This echoed the conclusions of the prominent early twentieth century academic historian U. B. Phillips who called the slave plantation a "school" that helped "civilize" the enslaved. This view became part of the general culture with a popular motion picture, what we might call the *Gone with the Wind* version of American slavery. Stanley Elkins, another prominent historian, created

a slightly more progressive version in his book, *Slavery*, published in 1959. He drew an analogy between slavery and the concentration camps of World War II, arguing that slavery was not benevolent. Like the camps, Elkins believed, slavery inflicted psychological damage, creating people with a “Sambo personality,” people who were powerless, helpless, childlike, and dependent on their owners.⁴

There were always dissenting voices, but when we began our work in the mid-1970s, this was the generally accepted view among experts. Enslaved Africans, they said, had no culture. Cultural memories had been somehow lost in the trauma of the Middle Passage from Africa. Concomitantly, they had little commitment to family, something particularly true of the men. Additionally, free blacks continued to suffer from the impact of slavery, even a century after the end of slavery. Their lack of progress compared to immigrant groups, sociologists contended, could be attributed to the absence of community and lack of institutions among blacks. Such beliefs had important consequences during the second half of the twentieth century. To make up for such supposed cultural lacks, the aim of policies became to instill values, to teach responsibility, especially to males, and to punish irresponsibility. The answer lay in education, though often with low expectations, and it was therefore less important to directly address economic inequality, racial segregation, and racial discrimination.⁵

With our first book, *Black Bostonians*, we set out to test these assumptions. We chose a northern city during the time of slavery with a small, poor black population, one-quarter of whom were born in the South, most under slavery. What we found was a strong commitment to family, with seventy-five percent of households headed by two parents. We also found an active, highly organized community raising a strong voice against southern slavery. Perhaps, we thought, Boston was an anomaly, so we extended our study. For our next book, *In Hope of Liberty*, we undertook an exhaustive study of a dozen northern cities from the colonial period to the Civil War. Again, we found many organizations, in fact networks of organizations linking many of the cities and towns. There were, of course, antislavery organizations and the Underground Railroad, but also a multiplicity of churches, political organizations that instituted everything from lawsuits to political parties, cultural organizations encompassing artists, writers, poets, and musicians, and welfare organizations as alternative to those from which blacks were excluded. There were also many organizational leaders, not only the well-known Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, but newspaper editors, ministers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, laborers, and servants.⁶

During those early years of our research, views were changing. Alex Haley’s bestselling book, *Roots*, and the television miniseries based on it brought the story of a family rooted in slavery to millions of Americans, and a new generation of scholars rediscovered the history of African American survival against all odds, a story of activism, protest, and struggle. Yet, in public school textbooks, movies, and many museums, African Americans still were depicted as passive victims, often perpetuating the contention of one early twentieth century writer that blacks were “the only people in the history of the world . . . that ever became free without any effort of their own. . . . They twanged banjos around the railroad stations, sang melodious spirituals, and believed that some Yankee would soon come along and give each of them forty acres of land and a mule.” *The Gone with the Wind* version of history lived on in the public imagination.⁷

In 2005 we gained a unique opportunity to influence public knowledge by working on a PBS documentary and creating its companion book, *Slavery and the Making of America*. In that book, we brought together two generations of scholarship in African American history, using African and

African American voices to tell history from the black perspective. We covered the importance of the slave trade and slavery to the American economy, an economy where the investment in slaves was so great that in 1860 the property value of slaves was greater than all of America's banks, railroads, and factories combined. We wrote about the African presence and cultural influence in colonial America, the long history of antislavery protests, early nineteenth-century civil rights actions against segregation, and the many forms of slave resistance.⁸

In *Slavery and the Making of America*, we told the inspiring stories of the Underground Railroad, including the tales of Harriet Tubman, who, after her own daring escape, bravely returned to the South many times for family and friends and personally rescued at least seventy people from slavery, and of Henry "Box" Brown who shipped himself from Virginia in a crate to the antislavery office in Philadelphia. We related the story of Fed, born into slavery in Virginia, separated from his mother at age ten, when he was weighted and sold by the pound into slavery in Georgia. He was abused by his new owner and kicked in the face, suffering a broken nose and a dislocated eye. Finally, as a young man, on his third escape attempt, he made it alone through the Louisiana swamps and up the Mississippi River, helped by blacks he encountered on the way, until, after nine months, he finally made contact with the underground railroad in Indiana. He then changed his name to John Brown and agents conducted him to Michigan, through Canada, and on to freedom in England. In London in 1855 he published his autobiography.⁹

We also included other stories of slavery and its development—the growth of the Cotton Kingdom in the lower South, with its new and even more brutal form of enslavement. The resulting vast internal slave trade prompted fears of being "sold down the river" and forcibly moved at least one million people from long-standing slave communities in the eastern and upper South to the Deep South, breaking up enslaved families and greatly increasing the danger of kidnapping for free blacks. Solomon Northup, whose amazing autobiography, *Twelve Years a Slave*, was made into a movie, became caught in this internal slave trade. He was born free in New York State and was working as a musician when he was drugged by his white companions and sold into slavery in Washington, D.C. Transported and sold to a plantation owner in Louisiana, he was unable to get word of his whereabouts to his family. After nine years of enslavement, he managed to obtain paper to write a letter but was betrayed and had to destroy it. After eleven years, he found a man to trust, a Canadian carpenter working for a time on the plantation, who finally managed to inform his family. The governor of New York sent the sheriff to rescue Northup after twelve years of enslavement.¹⁰

Slavery and the Making of America continued through the breakdown of compromises over slavery to the contention over the future of the western territories and the costly Civil War in which 620,000 people died. More than 200,000 African Americans fought for the United States in that war, and they were 37,000 of the 360,00 U.S. dead. It also touched on Reconstruction after the war, a period of great promise brought to a disastrous conclusion by widespread white supremacist terrorism.¹¹

Today there are two competing narratives of the Civil War, as we can see in conflicts over Confederate monuments. One states that slavery was the cause of the war, as declared by seceding states as they joined the Confederacy and took up arms against the United States to preserve slavery. The other, the "Lost Cause" narrative, depicts a patriotic South with contented slaves and such men as Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis as honorable heroes loyal to liberty but dedicated to a doomed cause. After the Civil War, this useful fiction rooted in slavery's rationalizations contending that blacks were both dangerous people in need of control and inferior people dependent on former masters preserved the power of whites, prevented black citizenship from being realized, and

enforced racial difference. The rationalizations continued to have consequences. Perceptions of dangerous, angry blacks, especially black men, justified lynching, vagrancy laws and harsh punishment for their violation, and convict labor. The belief that African Americans were lazy, incompetent, and intellectually inferior exaggerated racial differences and justified sharecropping's lack of pay, segregation, measures to prevent black voting, and a welfare system that periodically cut off aid to force people to work or provided very little aid, so as not to exacerbate dependency.

African Americans were not the only ones affected by these rationalizations. Enforcing racial difference and maintaining a color hierarchy has affected virtually all immigrant groups in America. In the mid-nineteenth century, Irish immigrants, identified as nonwhite, faced economic and social discrimination. In the late nineteenth century, the ideology of white supremacy shaped the American Empire and the terms of colonization. It justified the overthrow of the Hawaiian government and transferred beliefs about blacks to indigenous peoples in acquired territories. It even helped facilitate the internment of Japanese Americans and Italian Americans during World War II.

This is not an easy history to face. People still ask, Why not just move on? Why not just focus on the good, brave, proud, and uplifting that can now include heroic African Americans—Harriet Tubman, the underground railroad and Civil War hero who may someday be on the twenty-dollar bill? Or on Frederick Douglass, the ultimate success story. Born in slavery, he escaped, educated himself, became a newspaper editor and an eloquent lecturer, wrote three autobiographies, and became a successful international speaker, confidante of President Abraham Lincoln, and a statesman. He was handsome, brave, and strongly-built. Abolitionist and women's rights advocate Elizabeth Cady Stanton described the experience when she first heard him speak in Boston just a few years after his escape from slavery: "He stood there like an African prince, majestic in his wrath, as with wit, satire and indignation he graphically described the bitterness of slavery and the humiliation of subjugation to those who . . . were inferior to himself. Thus it was," she said, "that I first saw Frederick Douglass and wondered that any mortal man should have ever tried to subjugate a being with such talents, intensified with the love of liberty."¹²

Why not focus on Frederick Douglass? Or on the bravery of Rosa Parks? Or the inspiring sacrifice of Martin Luther King, Jr.? Or the exceptional ability of Barack Obama? Isn't that shameful history all in our past? No—it's not—so long as the rationalizations used to reconcile the contradictions of American slavery still shape our present.

These rationalizations live on in economic inequality that meant that in 2013 the median net wealth of a white family was \$142,000, while a black family's was \$11,000.¹³

They live on in a welfare system that equates poverty with immorality, in aid that requires work or work training regardless of circumstance or economic conditions, in time limits placed on lifetime aid to prevent dependency.

They live on in systematic discrimination in housing, voter registration, and employment.

They live on in selective law enforcement that meant, for example, that stop and frisk laws in New York City resulted in the fact that eighty-four percent of those stopped were black and Latino, though they were only fifty percent of the city's population, and even though the majority of drugs and weapons were found on the whites who were only sixteen percent of those stopped.¹⁴

They live on in drug wars with three strikes laws and mandatory minimum sentences that resulted in the thirty-seven percent of the total population who were people of color comprising sixty-seven percent of the prison population in 2015.¹⁵

They live on when a crack cocaine epidemic is defined as a black problem and results in drug wars and mass incarceration, while an opioid epidemic is defined as a white problem and results in treatment plans and a crackdown on doctors and pharmacies.

They live on in a society where the Black Lives Matter movement seems to many people to be asking for special privilege, and when a white policeman shoots and kills an unarmed, nonthreatening black man, it is an acceptable defense for that policeman to say that he was afraid for his life.

It's not all in our past. The history of slavery and its rationalizations about danger and inferiority shape our present and limit our options for America's future. For a nation, as for an individual, facing a painful past is uncomfortable but necessary in order to transcend that past. In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin observed that white people in America had been trapped in a history they did not understand and wouldn't be released from the tyranny of the past until they did understand it.¹⁶

Educating ourselves, understanding slavery's rationalizations, means uncovering painful realities but can lead to better choices for our future together as a people. As James O. Horton asserted in his presidential address to the Organization of American Historians in 2005, such education is "a matter of patriotism . . . patriotism not based on military chauvinism or jingoistic nationalism," but "based on a commitment to America's highest ideals and a determination that America's promise will one day become America's reality."¹⁷

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