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TOP STORY

Reckoning: Charleston Apologized for Slavery. Should Columbia?

By Eva Moore Jul 11, 2018 Updated Jul 11, 2018

Descendants of the enslaved people who built the McCord House gathered in Columbia July 7 for the unveiling of a historic marker. *Photo by Eva Moore*

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On Pendleton Street next to the University of South Carolina is a wooden house flanked by magnolia trees, the peeling paint so weathered it's unclear what color it used to be.

Last weekend, about 50 people stood out front on the grass and sidewalk as a proclamation from the South Carolina Senate was read and a group of children pulled the black cloth off a new historic marker out front.

The house, explains the new marker, was built in 1849 by people who were enslaved by the McCord family at Lang Syne Plantation near Fort Motte, about 40 miles down the Congaree River. Among the enslaved builders were two noted carpenters, John Spann and Anderson Keitt Sr., both of whom are named on the marker.

The ceremony was the most Columbia of scenes. Descendants of the enslaved people who'd built the house mingled cautiously with the white families who'd previously owned the house. Peggy McMaster, wife of Republican Gov. Henry McMaster, handed out cookies and lemonade on the house's lower porch, clad in flowered leggings. (The McMasters bought the McCord House a few years ago; it's one of several they own and rent out in the leafy neighborhoods surrounding the University of South Carolina.)

Jackie Whitmore is one of those descendants, and campaigned for the marker, which is funded by the Richland County Conservation Commission. Whitmore, who lives in Columbia, is one of several hundred descendants of people enslaved at Lang Syne who assembled in South Carolina over the weekend for what's called the United Family Reunion.

"It is very, very strange," he told the crowd. "I attended Allen University down the street from here, and I attended the University of South Carolina College of Social Work and took classes in DeSaussure and other buildings directly in front of this house." He didn't know then that his forebears had been ordered to build it.

Whitmore told Free Times the goal of the historic marker is to "acknowledge that the people had a role in the building of the city."

He compares the effort with what happened recently in the City of Charleston, where City Council voted June 19 to acknowledge and apologize for its role in slavery.

“Charleston has certainly chronicled African-Americans’ contribution to building that city,” Whitmore says. “We don’t have that here in Columbia. We only have a few notes of that.”

Whether it’s slavery, civil rights, or the Confederate monuments on the State House grounds, Whitmore says, we need to know — and tell — more about how Columbia came to be.

“We only know one side of the story,” he says. “The few remnants of African-American history in Columbia, they tore it all down. They discarded it. Every time you look they’re tearing more of it down.”

Charleston’s recent apology isn’t just on Whitmore’s mind. It’s got officials and institutions across the country talking.

But when asked whether Columbia has a similar responsibility, even the city’s black mayor is cautious. Columbia Mayor Steve Benjamin suggests Columbia’s not going down the Charleston path anytime soon.

“I think it’s fair to say that most governments at all levels, federal, state and local, were complicit in the slave trade for much of our history — which would include, of course, Columbia.” Charleston’s role, though, he says, “is pretty singular.”

Benjamin also doesn’t fault Charleston City Council for voting so narrowly on the issue. (The resolution barely passed, just 7-5.)

“I think there’s an incredible desire to look to the future. Some people never want to recognize the challenge of the past, but I also believe there are a lot of well-meaning people who would much rather remain focused on the future,” he says, noting that he hasn’t spoken to anyone on the Charleston council about it.

Is Charleston unique? Or should Columbia, just a few hours away and the capital of the state, be looking to its own responsibility for slavery? The answers aren’t easy to come by.

Slave trader Charles Logan owned this brick slave warehouse on Assembly and Senate streets, where the IHOP is now. *Works Progress Administration photograph.*

How Columbia Regulated and Taxed Slavery

Apologizing for slavery is nothing new. The U.S. Congress did so in 2008, acknowledging the federal government's role in both the slave trade and Jim Crow.

But Charleston City Council's vote to acknowledge and apologize for the city's role in slavery hits close to home.

It's not just that the Holy City was a key port in the Atlantic slave trade, where some 40 percent of enslaved people entered the United States. The City of Charleston itself also benefited from and enforced the institution of slavery, as Charleston Mayor John Tecklenburg explained the night of the vote.

The very year it was founded, Charleston created a slave badge system to allow slaveowners to hire out enslaved people — and the city made money off of it. In just one year, Tecklenburg said, the city made $15,108, or about $600,000 in today's money, in administering the rental of slaves. It was a major part of the city's budget.

The City of Charleston also ran a "workhouse" for punishing slaves.

"If an owner did not want to punish their slaves, they could just turn them over to the City of Charleston and we'd do it for them," Tecklenburg said.

"Do we have a reason to be sorry, to apologize? We do," he went on. "The history of Charleston became intertwined with this human history that got off track. Slavery built the wealth of Charleston. Our city's direct involvement is clear."

It turns out to be a lot harder to understand Columbia's role in slavery.

For one thing, a large part of the city was burned during the Civil War, and along with it many of the records that would help historians learn about the identities and lives of enslaved people here.

The burning of Columbia also means some of the built landscape of slavery is gone. Even slavery-associated buildings that lingered after the war — like, for example, slave trader Charles Logan's brick slave warehouse on Assembly Street, which stood where the IHOP is now — have since been torn down or moved *[online copy corrected]*. (When he died, Logan left a lot of money to Richland School District. Logan Elementary School is named after him.)

Also, for much of its early history, Columbia was not very big. A planned city, it was founded and designated as the capital in 1786. By 1805, there were only 100 houses here, according to one memoir.

And that makes it harder to say what life was like for enslaved people here, especially compared with somewhere like Charleston.

“Obviously it’s a much newer city, much smaller for most of its history than Charleston was, and in that way has less of a role, especially in the Atlantic slave trade,” says Jill Found, graduate assistant for USC’s Center for Civil Rights History and Research. “The population is smaller here, and as such the enslaved population is smaller here.”

Indeed, while black people dramatically outnumbered white people in South Carolina by the time of the Civil War, in Columbia in 1860 there were about 4,400 white people and 3,650 black people, according to census records.

“As you try to look at what slavery was like in Columbia, that’s a really hard question to answer because no one’s done that research, really,” Found says — whereas “You can buy books and books and books about slavery in Charleston.”

Some records pointing to the city’s role do remain, though. And they show that the City of Columbia was given the authority to make money off slavery, and played a role in reinforcing the institution.

In Columbia’s early years, the state Legislature granted the city the power to regulate enslaved people and to tax them as property.

In 1839, in fact, a law was passed allowing Columbia to impose a tax on all dogs in the city of between $1 and $5 each, and on each slave of no more than $1.

John Hammond Moore, in his History of Columbia and Richland County, records some of the other ways in which the city formally regulated the lives of enslaved people and free black people. From the beginning, he says, all black people were to be home “when the market bell rang at nine in the evening.” In later years, as abolitionist sentiment threatened the slavery system and tensions rose, the regulations became increasingly rigid. By 1851, black people in Columbia weren’t allowed to assemble in groups of more than five unless a white person was present.

Moore also quotes an entire Columbia ordinance from that same era, requiring:

“That any slave or free person of color who shall be found drunk, or shall otherwise misbehave, by acting in a noisy or boisterous manner, or by singing an indecent song, or hallooing within the limits of said town, shall for each and every offence receive not exceeding one hundred lashes; and any slave or free person of color who shall smoke a segar [sic] in any street or in any open and public place in the town, or shall walk with a cane, club, or stick (except the lame, infirm or blind), shall for each and every offence receive not exceeding twenty lashes.”

Nor did this regulation cease as the Confederacy and the institution of slavery itself fell. In the wake of Gen. Sherman’s march through the city, Columbia’s mayor wrote to the governor pleading for “a cavalry force” to come to the district and “shoot a few negroes and put them to work; on some plantations they refuse to go to work.”

The People Who Built Columbia

Columbia didn’t just enforce and tax slavery; it also benefited from the unpaid labor of people owned by Columbia and Richland County’s early citizens.

Kat Allen, research and archives manager for Historic Columbia, did much of the research for the foundation’s recent overhaul of the Hampton-Preston Mansion. Part of Historic Columbia’s goal with the renovation and reinterpretation was to give more attention to the enslaved people who lived and worked there.

They’ve been able to piece together some information about the role of enslaved people in building Hampton-Preston, like an 1820 newspaper ad placed by one of the two architects who built the mansion, searching for a slave named Glasco who’d run away or been stolen.

“It gives us, honestly, a little bit of insight but not much,” Allen says. “We have a child’s name — he was 12 — and the best description they could come up with: his complexion, a piece of his toe is missing, and he has a scar.”

Historic Columbia has also pulled together records from local churches, diaries and slaveowners’ wills, managing to identify at least the first names of some of the people who lived and worked at the mansion over the years.

Enslaved people built the mansion, as they did many Columbia buildings at the time. That includes the buildings at South Carolina College, which later became the University of South Carolina. Last year, in fact, the university erected markers acknowledging the role of slavery at the school.

Hiring out enslaved people was a booming business.

“A lot of enslaved people in Columbia were skilled workers,” Allen says. “They could become carpenters, mason workers, brick layers … painting, construction, anything. Leather goods. They’re being hired out. They’ll potentially apprentice first, and then their owner can profit off their labor.

“That’s how Columbia’s built,” Allen explains.

There were a handful of people in the city and surrounding countryside who enslaved large numbers of people. The Adams family owned 1,100 people in 1850, for example. And Wade Hampton III was one of the largest slaveowners in the South before the war. But in town, lots of people owned just a few people, Allen says.

“A lot of local merchants own enslaved people, and kind of what you think of as just everyday people that own shops, they perhaps enslave one or two people, or one person,” Allen says.

For enslaved people, living in a city like Columbia was different than living on a plantation, says Found, the USC researcher.

“The work enslaved people are doing is different,” Found says. “In a town or city, people probably aren’t working on a rice or indigo or cotton plantation. They’re probably working in domestic labor or doing maybe a skilled craft, blacksmith or carpentry, or they’re running errands in town.”

Asked whether living in a city would have been any better than living on a plantation, Found says that as a historian, that’s not necessarily a question she seeks to answer.

“There are some historians who’d say living in a city provided more opportunities, more opportunities for enslaved people to make connections outside the eyes of their owners,” Found says. “But there are also historians who would say cities allow enslaved people to be closely monitored at every step. There are effective policing mechanisms in cities that aren’t as effective as they would be on plantations; they’re disconnected from the enslaved populations of plantations.

“There are some things you could say that are better, but some things are also worse.”

First, Tell the Story

During the last several years, Columbia has begun to tell its civil rights history and Reconstruction history in greater and more realistic detail. Through the Columbia SC 63 project, placards have gone up along Main Street marking the civil rights-era protests that shaped the city. And institutions like Historic Columbia have worked to document Reconstruction-era Columbia.

“We’ve been able, sometimes with diligent research — and with some incredible luck — we’ve been able to uncover stories from the last 70-plus years,” Mayor Benjamin says.

That’s not the case when it comes to slavery in Columbia. At least not yet.

And in speaking to historians and public officials alike, something they all want is more research and more education.

Even the Republican governor agrees with that.

“We have a lot of history,” McMaster told Free Times at the dedication of the McCord House marker, when asked whether Columbia is doing enough to acknowledge the role of slavery. “I think there’s a lot more that needs to be celebrated. Our state goes back to the very beginning. I don’t think it’s being taught or learned nearly as much as it should be.”

For Found, who studies the relationship between slavery and institutions like universities, acknowledging the role of slavery in Columbia is important — but it goes hand in hand with learning more about it.

"I think that's really important for institutions, but I think it's incredibly important for localities and cities," Found says. "To better understand the world we live in today, we have to understand our past. That's true for Columbia the same way for Charleston. It's just that in Charleston people have been doing that work for decades, and no one's really breached it in Columbia in the same way."

Columbia's history, Found says, "is complicated, but vibrant and compelling, and I think deserves a stronger place in our understanding of who we are."

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