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Looking the Thing in the Face: Slavery, Race, and the Commemorative Landscape in Charleston, South Carolina, 1865–2010

By BLAIN ROBERTS and ETHAN J. KYTLE

[Denmark] Vesey represents the spirit of independence for which the founding fathers of America are praised But Denmark Vesey is a symbol of a spirit too violent to be acceptable to the white community. There are no Negro schools named for him, and it would be extremely poor taste and bad judgment for the Negroes to take any pride in his courage and philosophy. There is, indeed, little chance for Negro youth to know about him at all.

Charles S. Johnson, *Growing Up in the Black Belt* (1941)

HENRY DARBY ARRIVED AT MORRIS COLLEGE IN AUGUST 1971 A proud native of Charleston, South Carolina. During his first days on the Sumter, South Carolina, campus, he frequently bragged about his hometown to his fellow freshmen, many of whom hailed from rural areas. Darby's pride, it seems, attracted the attention of one of the historically black college's coaches, who called him up in front of his whole class at an early orientation session. The coach asked if he was from Charleston. Darby said yes. The coach asked again to be sure. The freshman confirmed that he was a Charlestonian. The coach then posed what Darby now describes as a "profound question": "Well, who was Denmark Vesey?" Darby was at a loss. He replied, "Denmark who?" Soon he was running out of the auditorium, with tears streaming down his face, for Darby was, in his own words, "ignorant of what this man had done in the very place I was born and raised."¹

The epigraph is from Charles S. Johnson, *Growing Up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South* (Washington, D.C., 1941), 243.

¹ Henry Darby, phone interview by Blain Roberts and Ethan J. Kytile, February 3, 2010. The authors would like to thank Harlan Greene and John White of the Special Collections Department at Addlestone Library, College of Charleston; Nicholas Butler and Christina Shedlock of the South Carolina Reading Room at the Charleston County Public Library; Karen Emmons of the Historic Charleston Foundation; and Kevin Eberle for their help in researching this article. They also wish to acknowledge Bruce Baker, Thomas Brown, Fitz Brundage, Doug Egerton, Bernard Powers, the anonymous referees for the *Journal of Southern History*, and the

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That a black Charlestonian like Darby, who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, had never heard of Denmark Vesey—who was executed in 1822 for plotting a slave rebellion in the city—is not entirely surprising. Charleston had worked hard since the nineteenth century to avoid candid discussions of its slaveholding past. When Scandinavian writer Fredrika Bremer visited the city in 1850, for example, she repeatedly talked about slavery with locals. Yet Bremer found these discussions unsatisfying. “I scarcely ever meet with a man, or woman either, who can openly and honestly look the thing in the face,” she complained.² Bremer underscored a critical feature of the city’s vexed relationship with its history that persists to this day. Slavery in Charleston—and the city’s history of race relations more generally—is rarely acknowledged.

In the late 1990s, Henry Darby began a campaign to make the city confront its complicated past. Motivated by his embarrassment at Morris College, he had learned all about Denmark Vesey’s failed plan to lead a slave uprising. Darby argued that Charleston should erect a monument that both commemorated Vesey and his coconspirators’ resistance to slavery and recognized the brutal crackdown that followed the incident. Darby’s proposal touched off a long and divisive debate over history, memory, race, and the public landscape in Charleston, a debate that shows no signs of ending despite the fact that ground was broken for the project in 2010. Opponents of the idea have argued that Vesey was little more than a would-be murderer who deserves no place in the city’s public space. In contrast, Darby and his supporters insist that Vesey was a freedom fighter whose memorialization would make that very space more historically accurate, for, as they note, the monuments and memorials that abound in downtown Charleston avoid the topic of slavery entirely. Even the Calhoun Monument, erected to honor a man who deemed southern slavery “a positive good,” makes no mention of the institution John C. Calhoun fought so hard to defend.³ It is as if the slave past of Charleston—the American city to which the peculiar institution mattered more than perhaps any other—has been erased from public memory.⁴

participants of the Race, Labor and Citizenship in the Post-Emancipation South conference, held in March 2010 in Charleston, South Carolina, for their thoughtful comments.

² Fredrika Bremer, *The Homes of the New World: Impressions of America*, translated by Mary Howitt (2 vols.; New York, 1853), I, 275.

³ John C. Calhoun, “Remarks on Receiving Abolition Petitions (Revised Report),” in Clyde N. Wilson et al., eds., *The Papers of John C. Calhoun* (28 vols.; Columbia, S.C., 1959–2003), XIII, 395.

⁴ Charleston played a central role in the growth of North American slavery. Although precise figures are unavailable, scholars estimate that between 360,000 and more than 500,000 slaves

Henry Darby's crusade to erect a Vesey monument would seem, at first glance, a product of the post-civil rights movement South. Having defeated Jim Crow laws and practices in Charleston, as in the rest of the region, black activists in the last several decades have turned their attention to desegregating the region's historical memory, a project that has often centered on the commemorative landscape. As Darby's own efforts reveal, African Americans' newfound power in this arena of cultural politics has paid visible dividends. From the decision in the mid-1990s to erect an Arthur Ashe statue on Richmond's Monument Avenue to the removal of the Confederate battle flag from the top of the South Carolina statehouse in 2000, the South's public spaces have become more inclusive.⁵ Viewing the Vesey proposal solely as a function of a changed political climate, however, misses a much longer tradition of black cultural activism in Charleston. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, black Charlestonians repeatedly challenged the assumption that it was up to whites to infuse the city's public spaces with meaning. Black residents attempted to shape the public landscape in ways that acknowledged both their enslaved past and their future aspirations: they memorialized Union soldiers in cemeteries; they protested efforts to commemorate John C. Calhoun; and they challenged the erection of a statue that sought to put blacks in their "proper" place. White intransigence, in every case, proved daunting.

were transported to what would become the United States and that 25 to 40 percent of them came through Charleston. Called "the Ellis Island of black Americans" by Peter H. Wood, nearby Sullivan's Island served as the quarantine location for most new arrivals through the end of the eighteenth century. Although the transatlantic slave trade was prohibited in the early 1800s, Charleston continued to be part of a vibrant local and national commerce in slaves throughout the antebellum period. A majority-black city for most of the nineteenth century, Charleston also became the "spiritual capital" of the Old South, a place dedicated at all costs to maintaining the institution of slavery and all that went along with it. Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974), xiv; W. Robert Higgins, "Charleston: Terminus and Entrepôt of the Colonial Slave Trade," in Martin L. Kilson and Robert I. Rotberg, eds., *The African Diaspora: Interpretive Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), 114–31, esp. 118; Daniel C. Littlefield, "Charleston and Internal Slave Redistribution," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 87 (April 1986), 93–105, esp. 93, 105; Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York, 2009), 33–34; David Eltis, "The Volume and Structure of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 58 (January 2001), 17–46, esp. 37, 45; James A. McMillin, *The Final Victims: Foreign Slave Trade to North America, 1783–1810* (Columbia, S.C., 2004), 118. W. Scott Poole deems Charleston the "spiritual capital of the South's slaveholding regime." Poole, *South Carolina's Civil War: A Narrative History* (Macon, Ga., 2005), 156.

⁵ Marie Tyler-McGraw, "Southern Comfort Levels: Race, Heritage Tourism, and the Civil War in Richmond," in James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (New York, 2006), 151–68; John M. Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), esp. 236–91.

Yet this earlier era of black cultural activism in Charleston has gone largely unexamined. Historians have focused their attention instead on the social, economic, and political battles that raged in the city during the Reconstruction period and beyond.⁶ In addition, even though the recent spate of scholarship on Civil War memory has done much to advance historians' understanding of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these works touch on Charleston only in passing.⁷ Scholars have devoted more attention to the city's historical preservation and tourism crusades in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s—when Charleston became “America's Most Historic City”—and to the legacy of these projects in later decades. As Stephanie E. Yuhl and W. Fitzhugh Brundage have demonstrated, elite white Charlestonians in the interwar period created an official history that pushed blacks to the margins, while African Americans themselves proved unable to challenge this narrative in any meaningful way.⁸ To a significant degree, however, the

⁶ Bernard E. Powers Jr., *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822–1885* (Fayetteville, Ark., 1994); Wilbert L. Jenkins, *Seizing the New Day: African Americans in Post-Civil War Charleston* (Bloomington, Ind., 1998); William C. Hine, “Frustration, Factionalism, and Failure: Black Political Leadership and the Republican Party in Reconstruction Charleston, 1856–1877” (Ph.D. dissertation, Kent State University, 1979).

⁷ Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865 to 1913* (New York, 1987); Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, 1997); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville, Fla., 2003); Cynthia Mills and Pamela H. Simpson, eds., *Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscapes of Southern Memory* (Knoxville, 2003); Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh, eds., *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture* (Chapel Hill, 2004); William A. Blair, *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865–1914* (Chapel Hill, 2004); W. Scott Poole, *Never Surrender: Confederate Memory and Conservatism in the South Carolina Upcountry* (Athens, Ga., 2004); Kathleen Ann Clark, *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration and Political Culture in the South, 1863–1913* (Chapel Hill, 2005); John R. Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation* (Lawrence, Kans., 2005); Bruce E. Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant: Historical Memory in the American South* (Charlottesville, 2007); Caroline E. Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill, 2008); Anne E. Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill, 2010); Benjamin G. Cloyd, *Haunted by Atrocity: Civil War Prisons in American Memory* (Baton Rouge, 2010).

⁸ Mayor Thomas Stoney called Charleston “America's Most Historic City” in 1924, and the chamber of commerce adopted the slogan during its first big push to advertise the city's historical attractions to tourists. It is still used today. Thomas P. Stoney, “Mayor Stoney's Annual Review,” *Year Book, 1924: City of Charleston* (Charleston, S.C., 1925), liv. On the creation of Historic Charleston in the interwar period, see Stephanie E. Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston* (Chapel Hill, 2005); and Yuhl, “Rich and Tender Remembering: Elite White Women and an Aesthetic Sense of Place in Charleston, 1920s and 1930s,” in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill, 2000), 227–48. See also Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 183–226. On Historic Charleston and the modern tourism industry, see Ethan J. Kyle and Blain Roberts, “‘Is It Okay to Talk about

past that Charleston has long presented in its commemorative landscape was forged earlier. From the end of the Civil War into the twentieth century, black and white Charlestonians skirmished over the meaning of the city's public spaces. The first draft of Charleston's official public memory resulted from contentious but largely unacknowledged negotiation, which predated the city's self-conscious attempt to become the mecca for historical tourism.⁹

Examining the postbellum conflicts over the commemorative landscape in tandem with the recent Vesey controversy, moreover, brings together two bodies of literature that are often only implicitly in conversation with each other. Historians such as David W. Blight, on the one hand, have explored how white Americans, bent on sectional reconciliation, "delivered the country a segregated memory of its Civil War on Southern terms" in the decades after the war.¹⁰ This well-developed historiography demonstrates that the centrality of slavery to the Civil War was largely erased from the national memory of the conflict by the early twentieth century. As a result, most of these studies of Civil War commemoration tend to limit their analysis to the period before 1920.¹¹

Slaves?' Segregating the Past in Historic Charleston," in Karen L. Cox, ed., *Destination Dixie: Tourism and Southern History* (Gainesville, Fla., forthcoming).

⁹ Despite significant evidentiary hurdles, scholars have unearthed important details about black history in Charleston, which they have used to better understand regional and national developments during Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era. This article builds on that pioneering work by examining together what might appear at first to be merely a series of isolated incidents in the decades after the Civil War. See Blight, *Race and Reunion*, esp. 64–71; Thomas J. Brown, "The Monumental Legacy of Calhoun," in Fahs and Waugh, eds., *Memory of the Civil War*, 130–56; Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860–1910* (Chapel Hill, 1990), 309–12; and Bruce G. Harvey, "World's Fairs in a Southern Accent: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, 1895–1902" (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1998). For a thought-provoking essay on the difficulties in verifying black oral history, see Karen Fields, "What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly," in Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York, 1994), 150–63.

¹⁰ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 2. See also Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*; and Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill, 1992). For works that complicate this story, insisting that an emancipationist interpretation of the war was not entirely drowned out by reconciliationists, see Blair, *Cities of the Dead*; Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead*; and M. Keith Harris, "Slavery, Emancipation, and Veterans of the Union Cause: Commemorating Freedom in the Era of Reconciliation, 1885–1915," *Civil War History*, 53 (September 2007), 264–90. For an argument that the emancipationist interpretation never took hold among white Unionists in Kentucky, see Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky*.

¹¹ Thomas J. Brown, "Civil War Remembrance as Reconstruction," in Brown, ed., *Reconstructions: New Perspectives on the Postbellum United States* (New York, 2006), 206–36, esp. 217–18. For two recent works that push their exploration of Civil War memory into the 1930s, see Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky*; and Caroline E. Janney, "War over a Shrine of Peace: The Appomattox Peace Monument and Retreat from Reconciliation," *Journal of Southern History*, 77 (February 2011), 91–120. For rare Civil War memory studies that cover postbellum and more contemporary events, see Coski, *Confederate Battle Flag*; and Paul A. Shackel, *Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape* (Lanham, Md., 2003).

On the other hand, scholars of contemporary memory, who investigate the challenges of public history and, increasingly, historical tourism, have moved the chronological focus forward.¹² Probing the memory of slavery at museums, plantations, and national parks, among other spaces, these authors have uncovered a terrain rife with discord over whether and how slavery should be addressed in modern America. Charleston's long-standing battle over the commemorative landscape helps bridge this chronological divide. A sustained analysis of one locale over a 150-year period, this article provides a rare window into how struggles over memory that date back to the Civil War continue to inform disputes today.¹³

Indeed, when viewed alongside the recent Vesey controversy, the city's postbellum debates expose continuities that have lasted into this century. For one, Charlestonians have fought over the same two public spaces—Marion Square and Hampton Park—for almost 150 years (see Figure 1). More important, blacks' attempts since 1865 to shape the commemorative landscape in the city have emphasized at least one of two fundamental claims that most white Charlestonians have ignored or resisted. Black Charlestonians, along with some sympathetic whites, insist that African American experiences, particularly slavery, must be incorporated into any accurate history of Charleston. Local blacks also argue that they have the right to represent their history and their race as they—and not whites—see fit. With the Vesey Monument, black Charlestonians have combined both of these concerns into a potent symbolic statement that has engendered vehement white resistance. In the end, the effort to memorialize Denmark Vesey indicates that the protracted campaign to inscribe black history into the public landscape may finally be bearing fruit. Yet, at the same time, the

¹² See, for example, Horton and Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public Memory*; Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, D.C., 2002); and James W. Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York, 1999). On museums and race more generally, see Lonnie G. Bunch, *Call the Lost Dream Back: Essays in History, Race, and Museums* (Washington, D.C., 2010). On tourism, see Richard D. Starnes, ed., *Southern Journeys: Tourism, History, and Culture in the Modern South* (Tuscaloosa, 2003); Anthony J. Stanonis, ed., *Dixie Emporium: Tourism, Foodways, and Consumer Culture in the American South* (Athens, Ga., 2008); and Cox, ed., *Destination Dixie*. For a recent study of slavery and memory in Charleston in light of the bicentennial of the international slave trade ban, see Simon Lewis, "Slavery, Memory, and the History of the 'Atlantic Now': Charleston, South Carolina and Global Racial/Economic Hierarchy," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 45 (June 2009), 125–35.

¹³ For another investigation of race and public memory in one location (in this case Luray, Virginia) over an extended period of time, see Ann Denkler, *Sustaining Identity, Recapturing Heritage: Exploring Issues of Public History, Tourism, and Race in a Southern Town* (Lanham, Md., 2007).

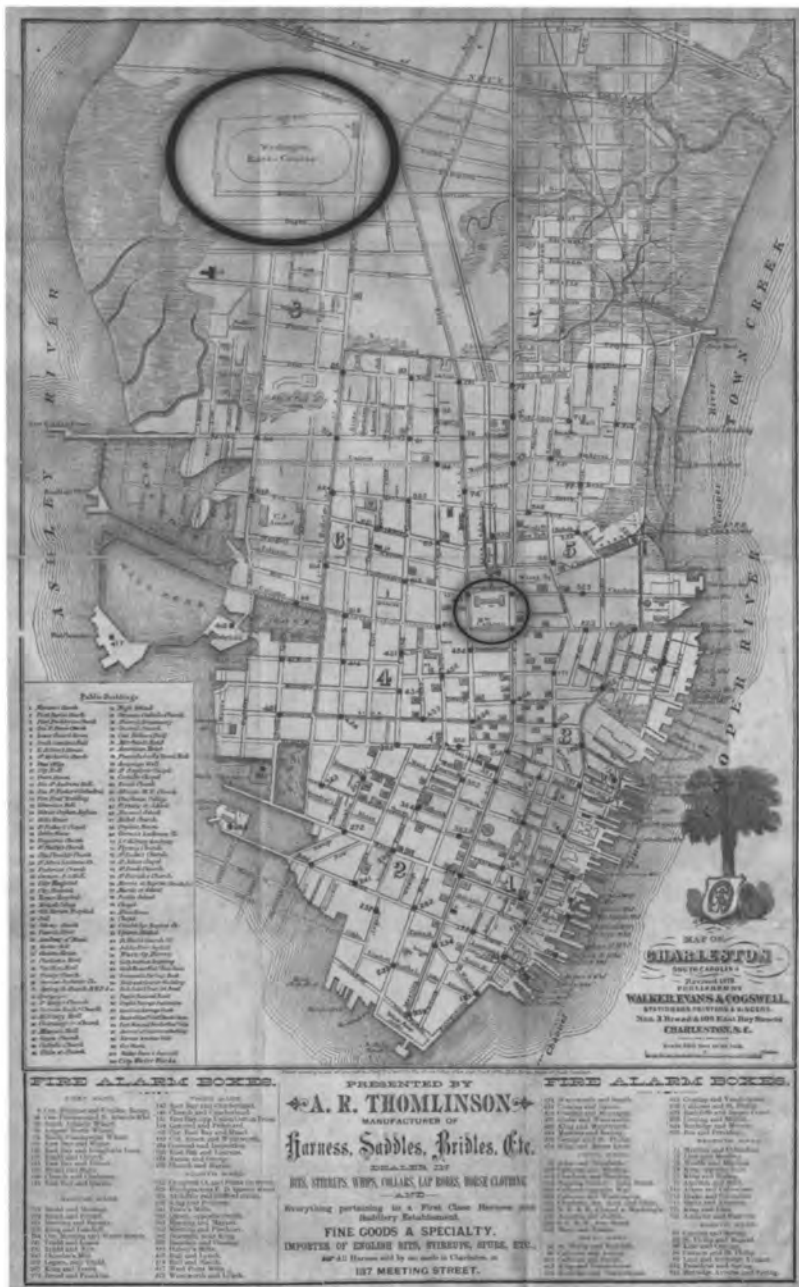


Figure 1. Map of Charleston, 1879. This map shows the Washington Race Course (later renamed Hampton Park) on the northern outskirts of the city and the Citadel Green (later renamed Marion Square) in the center. *Courtesy of Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.*

tenor and course of the debate over the Vesey Monument suggest that forgetting troubling elements of the past remains, well more than a century after the Civil War, the all-but-official policy in "America's Most Historic City."

Among the last major cities to fall to the Union in the final year of the Civil War, Charleston was abandoned by Confederates in February 1865. With the Stars and Stripes flying once again over Fort Sumter, black Charlestonians and their white allies set about commemorating the sacrifices of over 250 Union soldiers who had died as prisoners of war in the city. Held in a camp at the Washington Race Course—which later became Hampton Park—these soldiers, who had suffered mightily, were buried in unmarked graves.¹⁴

Their ordeal contrasted sharply with the experiences of those who had frequented the Washington Race Course before the war. Since its opening in the early 1790s, the track, which was located on the northern outskirts of the city, had been the center of the South Carolina elite's social world. For one week each February, the region's planter class descended on Charleston, gathering for parties, dancing at balls, and watching the horses run. State politics, too, played a part at the city's races, as planters, who dominated South Carolina's particularly undemocratic system of government, frequently held political meetings during Race Week. Even as wealthy southerners lost interest in horse racing by the 1840s in cities like Baltimore, Norfolk, and Richmond, South Carolina elites continued to flock to—and invest significant meaning in—racing in Charleston.¹⁵

The Civil War, however, brought the yearly festivities at the Washington Race Course to an abrupt halt, and by 1865 observers were struck by how little the site evoked the grandeur of the Old South. "The Race Course," reflected Union physician Henry O. Marcy, was "a resort of fashion in the palmy days of peace, but [is] now stript [*sic*] of ornament."¹⁶ Unionists in Charleston planned to add new ornaments that would permanently change the public significance of the track.¹⁷ By creating a suitable cemetery in which to memorialize the prisoners who

¹⁴ James Redpath, "Eye and Ear Notes: May-Day in Charleston, S.C.," *Youth's Companion*, June 1, 1865, p. 86.

¹⁵ Randy J. Sparks, "Gentleman's Sport: Horse Racing in Antebellum Charleston," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 93 (January 1992), 15–30, esp. 20–30; George C. Rogers Jr., *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys* (Norman, Okla., 1969), 114.

¹⁶ Henry O. Marcy quoted in Granville Priest Conn, *History of the New Hampshire Surgeons in the War of Rebellion* (Concord, N.H., 1906), 292.

¹⁷ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 68–70.

had died at the Washington Race Course, Charleston's black community would join with Union soldiers and northern reformers to put the final nail in the coffin of slavery. In the spring of 1865, a couple dozen local black men built the cemetery. Enclosed by a "substantial" whitewashed wooden fence built with materials salvaged from nearby buildings, the burial ground occupied more than half an acre of land.¹⁸ The gate to the cemetery was topped with an archway on which was written "Martyrs of the Race Course."¹⁹ This new cemetery was dedicated on May 1, 1865, thereby initiating the national day of remembrance that would be first known as Decoration Day and later called Memorial Day. The *Charleston Daily Courier* estimated that ten thousand people showed up on that hot May morning to enjoy festivities that included a parade of nearly three thousand black schoolchildren who placed flowers on the graves, numerous speeches and prayers, and a martial display by a Union regiment.²⁰

Decoration Day was not the first moment in which black Charlestonians had appropriated—and recast—important public spaces in the city. Two months earlier, an enormous crowd had gathered at the Citadel Green (renamed Marion Square in the 1880s), in a scene laden with irony. The park, which sits in the center of the peninsula, had served for decades as a parade ground for the adjacent South Carolina Military Academy, also known as the Citadel. But in early 1865 the grounds where white cadets, charged with protecting the city against slave insurrection, had regularly conducted public exercises became the gathering point for a parade of black Union soldiers and countless local African Americans. On March 21 this large procession set out through the city streets. Publicly ridiculing the system under which they had suffered for so long, some of the demonstrators conducted a mock slave auction, while others displayed a hearse that proclaimed, "Slavery Is Dead." In the same spirit, black Charlestonians continued to meet in the city on Emancipation Day (January 1) and Independence Day (July 4) during the decade that followed, laying claim to public parks, including the Citadel Green and White Point Garden, on the waterfront promenade known as the Battery.²¹

¹⁸ "The Martyrs of the Race Course," *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 2, 1865, p. 2 (quotation); Redpath, "Eye and Ear Notes."

¹⁹ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 69.

²⁰ "The Martyrs of the Race Course," *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 2, 1865, p. 2.

²¹ Clark, *Defining Moments*, 34–38, 96–97; Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant*, 28–29 (quotation on 28); Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), 177–78. Throughout the South during the postwar years, freed slaves organized similar celebrations, forging a new commemorative culture that endured in some places into the twentieth century. See Clark, *Defining Moments*; and Mitch Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808–1915* (Amherst, Mass., 2003).

Decoration Day was also not the first instance in which black Charlestonians had sought to commemorate the sacrifices of Union soldiers. In July 1863 Colonel Robert Gould Shaw led the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry of the U.S. Colored Troops on a failed frontal assault of nearby Fort Wagner, leaving Shaw and many of his men dead. Soon thereafter, the surviving members of the Massachusetts regiment, although still unpaid because of a dispute over unequal wages, began to raise a sum of nearly three thousand dollars for a monument to Shaw and his men. The Sea Island freedpeople, too, contributed to the effort. In the end, the planned memorial to Shaw and his men, who were buried together in the sands of Morris Island, was abandoned for fear that the shifting ground, both literal and ideological, would eventually put the monument in jeopardy. Instead, at the behest of local donors, the money was used to fund a black school in Charleston that was named for Shaw.²²

When black Charlestonians built the Martyrs of the Race Course cemetery in 1865, they picked up where Sea Island freedpeople had left off. Yet early-twentieth-century accounts of this first Decoration Day give the bulk of credit for the erection of the burial ground and the May 1 festivities to South Carolina superintendent of schools James Redpath, while minimizing the role of local blacks. Journalist Lloyd Lewis, for example, concluded succinctly that Redpath was “the author” of the first memorial services for Union soldiers.²³ Charles F. Horner’s 1926 biography of Redpath goes one step further. In a chapter entitled “Originator of Memorial Day,” Horner reprinted an 1880s letter in which Redpath claimed to have “originated Memorial Day and the whole machinery of the celebration.” Horner reinforced this interpretation by reproducing a painting that almost entirely whitewashes the

²² Marilyn Richardson, “Taken from Life: Edward M. Bannister, Edmonia Lewis, and the Memorialization of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment,” in Martin H. Blatt, Thomas J. Brown, and Donald Yacovone, eds., *Hope and Glory: Essays on the Legacy of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment* (Amherst, Mass., 2001), 94–115, esp. 94–95; Frances D. Gage to Francis George Shaw, September 6, 1863, in *Memorial R.G.S.* (Cambridge, Mass., 1864), 153–55; Luis F. Emilio, *History of the Fifty-fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1863–1865* (Boston, 1894), 228–30; Virginia Matzke Adams, ed., *On the Altar of Freedom: A Black Soldier’s Civil War Letters from the Front* (Amherst, Mass., 1991), 65–67. The memory of the exploits of Shaw and the Fifty-fourth at Fort Wagner was eventually preserved in stone, but not in the South. A granite column was erected on Staten Island, while Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s impressive Shaw Memorial was unveiled on Boston Common in 1897.

²³ Lloyd Lewis, *Myths After Lincoln* (New York, 1941), 304. Redpath’s wife, Mary, insisted that both she and her husband “planned and carried out” the first Decoration Day in Charleston. Mary A. Redpath quoted in Ethel Morse, “An Unofficial Memorial Day,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*, 47 (July–August 1910), 111–20 (quotation on 113). See also Paul H. Buck, *The Road to Reunion, 1865–1900* (Boston, 1937), 116.

Decoration Day ceremony, depicting at most one African American face among a crowd of more than a dozen white soldiers, ministers, children, and others.²⁴ The *American Missionary* and the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, in contrast, credited Charleston's black community alone with having pioneered "the touching practice of adorning the graves of their deliverers."²⁵

The truth lies somewhere in between.²⁶ Redpath, though viewed by many contemporaries as a shameless self-promoter, certainly played an important role in the first Decoration Day.²⁷ Notwithstanding his vainglorious boast, Redpath and a small group of northerners appear to have come up with the idea for a "Monument to the Martyrs of the Race-Course" when they visited the site in March 1865.²⁸ But if the cemetery was the brainchild of outsiders, the initiative was made possible by the efforts of local blacks, for it was Charleston's African American community that had worked to sustain the prisoners while they lived and their memories once they died. When General William T. Sherman's march through Georgia forced the Confederacy to move starving Union prisoners from Andersonville to Charleston, black women took pains to provide them bread.²⁹ And, as the racecourse prisoners fell victim to disease, starvation, and exposure to the elements, black Charlestonians kept alive their experiences as prisoners of war. "The colored people here tell fearful stories of the sufferings of our prisoners," noted Redpath, "while many of the [ex-Confederate] oath-takers pretend to deny that any cruelties were practiced."³⁰

²⁴ Charles F. Horner, *The Life of James Redpath and the Development of the Modern Lyceum* (New York, 1926), 113 (quotation), 115. The painting was produced by L. D. McMorris.

²⁵ "Decoration Day: Who Began to Adorn the Soldier's Graves?" *American Missionary*, 14 (July 1870), 156. This article also contains a reprint on Decoration Day from the *Boston Daily Advertiser*.

²⁶ This interpretation builds on David Blight's convincing case that "[b]lack South Carolinians and their white Northern abolitionist allies were primarily responsible for the founding of Decoration Day." Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 65.

²⁷ For critiques of Redpath's self-promotion by black abolitionists like Martin Delany and Mary Ann Shadd, as well as some modern historians, see Chris Dixon, *African America and Haiti: Emigration and Black Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, Conn., 2000), 191–202; Edward J. Renehan Jr., *The Secret Six: The True Tale of the Men Who Conspired with John Brown* (New York, 1995), 221; and Tilden G. Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm: A Life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New Haven, 1968), 226–27. For a recent study that challenges this negative reading of Redpath's peripatetic reform career, see John McKivigan, *Forgotten Firebrand: James Redpath and the Making of Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2008).

²⁸ "Monument to the Martyrs of the Race-Course," *New York Tribune*, April 8, 1865, p. 3 (quotation); McKivigan, *Forgotten Firebrand*, 108.

²⁹ "Charleston, S.C.," *Student and Schoolmate*, 17 (March 1866), 96–98, esp. 98. For more on the transfer of Union prisoners from Andersonville to Charleston, see William Marvel, *Andersonville: The Last Depot* (Chapel Hill, 1994), 198–203.

³⁰ "Monument to the Martyrs of the Race-Course," *New York Tribune*, April 8, 1865, p. 3.

When they first visited the racecourse, all that Redpath and his colleagues were able to find to acknowledge the plight of the prisoners was "little pieces of board" with numbers painted on them. To make matters worse, white caretakers displayed more interest in preserving the racetrack than in memorializing the fallen. So, before they even returned to the city, Redpath and his colleagues formed themselves into "a committee to raise funds to erect a fence and monument at the site."³¹ The committee consisted chiefly of white Union officers, reformers, and ministers, though it included at least one local African American: future congressman Robert C. De Large, who had been part of a relatively prosperous antebellum free black family.³² The committee quickly drafted a circular that solicited contributions of ten cents from all loyal South Carolinians in order to "give every one the privilege, and debar none from aiding this noble work."³³ In response to this appeal, a group of approximately five thousand African Americans met at Zion Church, where local black men agreed to build a fence for the racecourse gravesite.³⁴

It was black Charlestonians, then, who took the lead in erecting the physical tribute to fallen Union soldiers. Members of two new black voluntary associations, the "Friends of the Martyrs" and the "Patriotic Association of Colored Men," cleaned up the grounds and "newly raised the graves" of the 257 soldiers who had died there.³⁵ They also crafted the nine-foot-high fence that surrounded the cemetery and painted the "Martyrs of the Race Course" sign "by their own initiation," according to one observer.³⁶ And, in a point emphasized by Redpath, among others, the nearly thirty laborers worked without any sort of compensation.³⁷ Black Charlestonians, too, made the Decoration Day festivities such a resounding success. According to the Charleston *Daily Courier*, black men, women, and children made up the bulk of the ten

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Morse, "Unofficial Memorial Day," 117.

³³ "Monument to the Martyrs of the Race-Course," *New York Tribune*, April 8, 1865, p. 3.

³⁴ Morse, "Unofficial Memorial Day," 117.

³⁵ "The Union Dead," *New York Times*, May 14, 1865, p. 2 (quotations); "The Martyrs of the Race Course," *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 2, 1865, p. 2.

³⁶ Henry O. Marcy, "First Memorial Day May 1, 1865," clipping from unidentified Boston or Cambridge newspaper, [May 29], 1923 (Concord Free Public Library, Concord, Mass.) (quotations); Quartermaster General's Office, *Roll of Honor: Names of Soldiers Who, In Defence of the American Union, Suffered Martyrdom in the Prison Pens Throughout the South*, Vol. 14 (Washington, D.C., 1868), 238.

³⁷ Redpath, "Eye and Ear Notes," 86. Esther Hill Hawks mentions the gratuitous efforts of the black volunteers three times in her diary. Entries for April 8 and May 1, 1865, in Gerald Schwartz, ed., *A Woman Doctor's Civil War: Esther Hill Hawks' Diary* (Columbia, S.C., 1984), 128, 137.

thousand people in the crowd that turned up at the Washington Race Course to celebrate the cemetery's dedication.³⁸

That black Charlestonians had a hand in memorializing the sacrifices of Union soldiers no doubt left many local whites—who had long nursed illusions about the loyalty and devotion of their enslaved population—unhappy. But whites' precise response is difficult to determine with certainty. Esther Hill Hawks, a northern physician and teacher who attended the dedication ceremonies, recorded that she “saw no quarrelling [*sic*] or unpleasant feeling anywhere,” though these comments may have revealed more about the sympathetic crowd in attendance than about the city's population as a whole.³⁹ In contrast, a brief account of the event published fifty years later by the *New England Magazine* described more contention, noting that “there were several slight disturbances during the exercises, and much harsh and acrimonious talk about the event locally afterward.”⁴⁰ This would not have surprised Whitelaw Reid, who visited Charleston not long after the first Decoration Day. The future editor of the *New York Tribune* concluded that “[t]he Martyrs of the Race Course” inscription over the cemetery's entrance “must bring shame to the cheek of every Southern man who passes.”⁴¹

It is clear that some Charleston whites had bristled at earlier efforts to memorialize Union dead in the city. In 1863 local Union sympathizer Dr. Albert Mackey had secured a spot in Charleston's Magnolia Cemetery, which lay just north and east of the Washington Race Course, for a Union officer who had died in the assault on Fort Sumter. Yet, in the words of a Union admiral, “the chivalry” in Charleston objected to the presence of a Union body alongside the ever-growing number of Confederate dead that lay in the rural cemetery.⁴² As a result, the officer's remains were moved to Potter's Field, the traditional burial site for much of the city's enslaved and indigent populations. In March 1865 Union officials made arrangements to return the body to Magnolia. With Federal troops in control of Charleston, other Union bodies soon followed. The following month Redpath helped select the site in Magnolia Cemetery, “much to the

³⁸ “The Martyrs of the Race Course,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 2, 1865, p. 2.

³⁹ Entry for May 1, 1865, in Schwartz, ed., *Woman Doctor's Civil War*, 138.

⁴⁰ Earl Marble, “Origin of Memorial Day,” *New England Magazine*, 32 (June 1905), 470.

⁴¹ Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Southern Tour, May 1, 1865 to May 1, 1866* (New York, 1866), 69.

⁴² Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren, ed., *Memoir of John A. Dahlgren, Rear-Admiral United States Navy* (Boston, 1882), 500–501, 505 (quotation); John A. Dahlgren, ed., *Memoir of Ulric Dahlgren* (Philadelphia, 1872), 231.

evident disgust of a rebel who is still in charge of the grounds," according to one observer.⁴³ In the following decades, white Charlestonians continued to find fault in Union Decoration Days, even those held in nearby South Carolina cities. When hundreds of black Charlestonians joined African Americans from across the Lowcountry to recognize the Union dead buried in Beaufort in 1890, for example, the *News and Courier* derisively labeled the event "a burlesque."⁴⁴

Whatever white Charlestonians' immediate reaction to the Martyrs of the Race Course cemetery, the memory of the first Decoration Day, as well as the new use of the space, faded fast. Several sources from 1865 report that plans to supplement the modest cemetery with "a monument erected to the memory of the soldiers" had been made, provided "sufficient means" could be raised.⁴⁵ But the necessary funds seem never to have been secured, and a sketch and description published in *Harper's Weekly* in 1867 made no mention of a monument. The cemetery, such as it was, quickly fell into disrepair. Visitors in late 1865 described the burial ground as "tasteful," but the 1867 *Harper's Weekly* feature depicted it as rough and overgrown.⁴⁶ "There is," wrote the magazine's artist, "a rude desk from which the service for the dead was sometimes read. At this time a mass of tangled grass and herbage nearly hides from sight the little head-boards which mark the graves."⁴⁷ By the early 1870s the remains of the Union dead had been reinterred at the national

⁴³ Entry for April 8, 1865, in Schwartz, ed., *Woman Doctor's Civil War*, 128. The next month Magnolia's president pro tem complained to Union officials about these actions to no avail. The president pro tem objected in particular to Union plans to build a large wooden fence behind which their soldiers would be buried, as well as to the activities of the black Union regiment—the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth—that had camped in the cemetery since February. While Union general John P. Hatch paid lip service to holding soldiers accountable for any damage they caused, he refused to select new grounds for the Union dead. J. N. Cardozo, *Reminiscences of Charleston* (Charleston, S.C., 1866), 78–80; Thomas J. Brown, "Introduction," in Ted Ashton Phillips Jr., *City of the Silent: The Charlestonians of Magnolia Cemetery* (Columbia, S.C., 2010), xi–xix.

⁴⁴ "A Burlesque at Beaufort," *Charleston News and Courier*, May 31, 1890, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Redpath, "Eye and Ear Notes," 86 (first quotation); entry for May 1, 1865, in Schwartz, ed., *Woman Doctor's Civil War*, 137 (second quotation).

⁴⁶ Henry L. Swint, ed., *Dear Ones at Home: Letters from Contraband Camps* (Nashville, 1966), 180; "Martyrs of the Race-Course," *Harper's Weekly*, May 18, 1867, pp. 309, 318.

⁴⁷ "Martyrs of the Race-Course," *Harper's Weekly*, May 18, 1867, p. 318. Perhaps one of the reasons that the racecourse cemetery was not preserved is that Union supporters in Reconstruction Charleston turned their attention to other venues in subsequent years. In 1867 a local group led by Mrs. Lorenzo T. Potter was soliciting contributions to erect a monument to the Union dead in Magnolia featuring a shaft made of New England granite. Yet the monument planned by Potter would be built not in Magnolia Cemetery but rather in the national cemetery at Beaufort, South Carolina, to which Charleston's Union dead were removed as a part of a larger effort to bury Union soldiers in national cemeteries. "The Loyal Dead at Charleston," *New York Times*, July 23, 1867, p. 4. For more on the creation of national cemeteries, see Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead*, 131–38; and Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York, 2008), 211–49.

cemetery in Beaufort.⁴⁸ And before the deceased were even removed, the South Carolina Jockey Club began working to return the Washington Race Course to its former glory. In fact, less than a year after the Martyrs of the Race Course cemetery was erected, the club formally applied to reacquire control of the land from the Freedmen's Bureau.⁴⁹ After the application was granted in the fall of 1866, the South Carolina Jockey Club started raising money "to make the repairs necessary to put and keep the track in perfect order."⁵⁰ In 1875 Charlestonians gathered at the track to attend the first horse races held there since the war. The *New York Times* called the three days of races "the largest turf gathering seen in Charleston for fifteen years."⁵¹

Elite Charlestonians eventually forgot about the Martyrs of the Race Course cemetery entirely. As the city's Ladies' Memorial Association (LMA) prepared to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its campaign to honor the sacrifices of Confederate veterans, one of the association's directresses, Mary B. Poppenheim, stumbled on a reference to the interracial celebration that took place in Charleston just after the war. Although born, raised, and living in the city, Poppenheim, who was also the chair of education for the United Daughters of the Confederacy, appears to have first learned of the 1865 Decoration Day services from a May 1915 article in the *Christian Herald*. Poppenheim asked Videau Legare Beckwith, the LMA's president and also a native Charlestonian, what she could find out about the event. "I regret that I was unable to gather any official information in answer to this," Beckwith responded.⁵²

⁴⁸ The bodies were removed from Charleston to Beaufort between 1868 and 1871. Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead*, 138; Mark Hughes, *Bivouac of the Dead* (Westminster, Md., 1995), 240; Frank Moore, [ed.], *Memorial Ceremonies at the Graves of Our Soldiers, Saturday, May 30, 1868* (Washington, D.C., 1869), 101; Kristina Kathryn Dunn, "The Union Forever: The Development of the Beaufort National Cemetery" (M.A. thesis, University of South Carolina, 2005), 12–13.

⁴⁹ Theodore G. Barker to H. W. Smith [Asst. Adj. Genl., Edisto, S.C.], February 19, 1866; and Joseph C. Cammer, Oath, February 16, 1866, in Unregistered Applications for Restoration, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of South Carolina, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1872, Record Group 105 (National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.), National Archives Microfilm Series M-869, reel 31 (copy in South Carolina Room, Charleston County Public Library, Charleston, S.C.; hereinafter SCR, CCPL).

⁵⁰ [Name illegible] to the president and members of the South Carolina Jockey Club, October 12, 1870 (quotation); Headquarters, Assistant Commissioner, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands to South Carolina Jockey Club, August 30, 1866; South Carolina Jockey Club to Theodore G. Barker, September 18, 1866, all in South Carolina Jockey Club Records (South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, S.C.; hereinafter SCHS).

⁵¹ "The Charleston Races," *New York Times*, January 21, 1875, p. 2.

⁵² Ladies' Memorial Association Minutes, Annual Meeting, June 3, 1915, p. 208; "Report of the President of the Ladies Memorial Association, Charleston, SC, June 5, 1916," p. 3 (quotation), in Ladies' Memorial Association Minutes, both in Ladies' Memorial Association

The fact that two leading Charleston women, both of whom were devoted to commemorating the Civil War, knew nothing of the 1865 events is telling: white Charlestonians had no memory of the city's first tribute to the struggle against slavery.

Black Charlestonians and their white Unionist allies, however, kept their Decoration Day observations going, though not at Washington Race Course. Instead, they focused on the Union dead buried at nearby Magnolia Cemetery. In 1869, for example, a group that included members of the local chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic, the mayor of the city, and the future governor of the state came together to pay their respects. The orations that day included a speech by Alonzo Jacob Ransier, a black representative in the state legislature who later served as lieutenant governor and a member of the U.S. House of Representatives.⁵³ The following year a crowd of over two thousand people, most of whom were black, showed up for Decoration Day ceremonies at Magnolia.⁵⁴ The removal of Union remains to national cemeteries in the late 1860s and early 1870s led to interracial Decoration Day ceremonies for Union soldiers outside Charleston. They continued in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, though more often they took place in Beaufort and Florence rather than in Charleston.⁵⁵

Charleston's black community built the Martyrs of the Race Course cemetery to commemorate the Union's struggle against slavery. Not surprisingly, black Charlestonians also resisted efforts to publicly recognize one of the peculiar institution's most outspoken defenders, John C. Calhoun. Throughout much of the mid- to late nineteenth century, white Charlestonians showered affection on Calhoun with parades, statues, busts, and finally, two monuments that were erected in the heart of the city. By contrast, African Americans mocked, critiqued, and vandalized these memorials to South Carolina's leading antebellum politician, thereby rejecting the claim that he—and all he stood for—deserved to be recognized in the city's public space and public memory.

When Calhoun died in 1850, thousands of whites from across the city, the region, and the nation gathered in Charleston to pay their

Records, 1866–1916 (SCHS); Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 70–71. For more on Mary B. Poppenheim, see Joan Marie Johnson, ed., *Southern Women at Vassar: The Poppenheim Family Letters, 1882–1916* (Columbia, S.C., 2002).

⁵³ *Memorial Ceremonies on the Occasion of Decorating the Graves of the Federal Dead at Magnolia Cemetery, May 29th, 1869, Under the Auspices of Post No. 1, G.A.R., of Charleston, S.C.* (Charleston, S.C., 1869); *Charleston South Carolina Weekly Republican*, June 5, 1869, p. 2.

⁵⁴ "The Union Dead," *Charleston Daily News*, May 31, 1870, p. 3.

⁵⁵ Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant*, 78. See also Moore, [ed.], *Memorial Ceremonies at the Graves of Our Soldiers*, 101–10.

respects at his funeral procession.⁵⁶ Reflecting a naive faith in the paternalist ideology that prevailed across much of the Old South, local officials opened the ceremonies to everyone, so the city's black population could also honor Calhoun.⁵⁷ Yet eyewitnesses reported that the reactions of local African Americans contrasted sharply with the outpouring of sentiment evinced by the white crowds. While whites viewed the funeral as a sober moment for mourning and reflection, blacks, according to Fredrika Bremer, were enthused. The Scandinavian writer and reformer, who happened to be in town during the Calhoun funeral, noted that "[d]uring the procession a whole crowd of negroes leaped about the streets, looking quite entertained, as they are by any pomp." Yet their excitement, she added, also had political significance. According to Bremer, blacks at the procession declared, "Calhoun was indeed a wicked man, for he wished that we might remain slaves."⁵⁸ Elijah Green, one of the slaves who dug Calhoun's grave, agreed. He recalled, "I never did like Calhoun 'cause he hated the Negro; no man was ever hated as much as him by a group of people."⁵⁹ Protest against Calhoun did not stop once he was dead and buried. Not long after Confederate troops abandoned Charleston in early 1865, a female slave destroyed a bust of Calhoun that sat in the office of the *Charleston Mercury*.⁶⁰ Calhoun's tomb also suffered in the wake of the war. The *New York Times* reported that "several pieces of the large marble slab have been battered off" and that vandals had left "several inscriptions in pencil, on the stone."⁶¹ The identity of the culprits and their motives, however, are not clear.

More than twenty years passed before the Ladies' Calhoun Monument Association (LCMA) erected a tribute to Calhoun in Marion

⁵⁶ Walter J. Fraser Jr., *Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City* (Columbia, S.C., 1989), 228; Rogers, *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys*, 167–68; Maurie D. McNinnis, *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill, 2005), 153–54.

⁵⁷ The *Charleston Courier*, April 27, 1850, p. 2, reported, "our negro population were also admitted to the privilege of visiting the remains of the deceased, and embraced it with considerable numbers." For more on the rise of and resistance to paternalism among antebellum white southerners, see Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York, 2009).

⁵⁸ Bremer, *Homes of the New World*, I, 305.

⁵⁹ Elijah Green, interview in George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Vol. II: *South Carolina Narratives*, Pt. 2 (Westport, Conn., 1972), 196; McNinnis, *Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston*, 154.

⁶⁰ "The Dark Iconoclast," *Harper's Weekly*, March 25, 1865, p. 178; Viola Caston Floyd, comp., "The Fall of Charleston," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 66 (January 1965), 1–7, esp. 2.

⁶¹ "Calhoun's Grave," *New York Times*, May 7, 1865, p. 1. See also Sidney Andrews, *The South Since the War: As Shown By Fourteen Weeks of Travel and Observation in Georgia and the Carolinas* (Boston, 1866), 10.

Square (formerly the Citadel Green) in 1887. Deemed “the only public square in Charleston that merits the title” by poet William Gilmore Simms in 1857, the park had gone from sitting on the northern periphery of the city to its center over the course of the nineteenth century.⁶² It was adjacent to both the original Citadel, the arsenal built primarily to police Charleston’s enslaved population in the wake of Denmark Vesey’s failed uprising, and the Neck, the neighborhood in which a majority of the city’s free African Americans had long lived.⁶³ By installing a monument to South Carolina’s most outspoken proslavery voice in this particular space, in other words, the LCMA signaled the centrality of Calhoun to Charleston, while also providing the city’s black residents with yet another reminder of its racial politics. As black Charlestonian Mamie Garvin Fields, who was born in 1888, later observed, “I believe white people were talking to us about Jim Crow through that statue.”⁶⁴

Yet the monument did not explicitly address Calhoun’s racial beliefs at all. It depicted the politician, cast in bronze, rising from his seat in the Senate, with his cloak falling back on his chair and his right index finger pointing forward. The large granite base of the statue was to have been surrounded by four allegorical figures, representing Truth, Justice, History, and the Constitution, though only one was installed (see Figure 2).⁶⁵ The Calhoun Monument made no mention of its subject’s strident support of slavery. On this score it had much in common with the Confederate statues and sculptures that were raised across the South from the 1880s to the 1920s. Confederate memorials—from odes to the common soldier to statues of war heroes like Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson and Robert E. Lee—also

⁶² William Gilmore Simms, “Charleston: The Palmetto City,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 15 (June 1857), 1–22 (quotation on 12); Brown, “Monumental Legacy,” 138.

⁶³ John P. Radford, “Race, Residence and Ideology: Charleston, South Carolina in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Historical Geography*, 2 (October 1976), 329–46, esp. 333–34; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!* 228–29.

⁶⁴ Mamie Garvin Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir* (New York, 1983), 57. It is not clear whether this reference is to the Calhoun Monument that was erected in 1887 or to its successor, which replaced the first in 1896.

⁶⁵ It is difficult to determine with certainty which figure was installed. *Harper’s Weekly* reported in 1897 that it was “never clear” which figure was placed at the base of the monument. An 1887 New York *Tribune* article, however, suggests that Justice was the first figure completed and that by the time of the monument’s unveiling it was already en route to Charleston. Sketches of the first Calhoun Monument, as well as its model, similarly point to Justice. “The Calhoun Monuments,” *Harper’s Weekly*, April 3, 1897, p. 343; “Doing Honor to Calhoun,” New York *Tribune*, April 27, 1887, p. 5; “A Tribute to Calhoun,” New York *Times*, April 27, 1887, p. 5; “The Calhoun Monument at Charleston,” *Harper’s Weekly*, March 12, 1887, p. 189; “In Memory of Calhoun,” New York *Times*, November 25, 1894, p. 21.



Figure 2. First Calhoun Monument. A sketch of the first Calhoun Monument, unveiled in 1887, depicts John C. Calhoun rising from his seat, standing over the lone allegorical figure installed. Local African Americans mocked the statue as "Mr. Calhoun an' he Wife." *New York Times*, November 25, 1894, p. 21.

studiously avoided the issue of slavery, highlighting instead the glorious, if doomed, military struggle that the Confederacy had waged. But the Calhoun Monument differed from these memorials in an important way. Calhoun was represented as he was remembered in the decades prior to the conflict: standing up, both literally and figuratively, on the Senate floor for South Carolina's interests. The Calhoun Monument thus signaled an attachment to the racial ideology of the Old South in a more direct fashion than most Confederate monuments, including those eventually erected in Charleston. While none mentioned slavery and all reinforced the racial politics of the Jim Crow era, the Calhoun Monument alone harked back to a time

before the Civil War, when its precipitating cause occupied the energies of the state's politicians.⁶⁶

The Calhoun Monument was unveiled in April 1887, with the tune of "Dixie" playing in the background and celebratory shouts filling the air.⁶⁷ Yet for all the pageantry of the dedication ceremony, the monument itself was not universally well received, even by white Charlestonians. Noting its considerable \$44,000 price tag, one critic concluded that the Calhoun Monument "might easily have been a more artistic work, and some severe criticisms have been made upon it."⁶⁸ Charlestonian Henry S. Holmes insisted that "[g]reat was the disappointment when the hideous bronze figure was disrobed," calling the statue a "swindle," a "monstrosity," "a frightful sight," and an "abortion."⁶⁹ By the early 1890s, the LCMA was determined to remove the Calhoun Monument. The association's official explanation lingered on aesthetic objections to the statue: its imbalance of proportion, Calhoun's anachronistic Prince Albert coat, and his exaggerated right index finger that "amounted to a deformity."⁷⁰ The lone female allegorical figure sparked a good deal of negative commentary, too. Henry Holmes wrote that the figure was "a fearful hag whom the street urchins have always called 'he wife.'"⁷¹ *Harper's Weekly* ultimately made explicit the racial undertones that Holmes and others left unsaid, reporting that the city's "pickaninnies christened her, 'Mis' Calhoun.'"⁷² Made the butt of a joke by local blacks, "Mr. Calhoun an' he Wife," as the statue widely came to be known in Gullah dialect, represented as much a social and political affront as an aesthetic disaster.⁷³

⁶⁶ Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*, 129; Thomas J. Brown, *The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, 2004), 5.

⁶⁷ "Calhoun Unveiled," *Charleston News and Courier*, April 27, 1887, p. 1; "In Honor of Calhoun: Unveiling of His Statue," *Baltimore Sun*, April 27, 1887, p. 1 (supplement); "Doing Honor to Calhoun," *New York Tribune*, April 27, 1887, p. 5.

⁶⁸ "A Tribute to Calhoun," *New York Times*, April 27, 1887, p. 5.

⁶⁹ Entry for December 2, 1895, p. 16 (first four quotations), p. 20 (fifth quotation), Henry S. Holmes Diary (Charleston Library Society, Charleston, S.C.; hereinafter CLS).

⁷⁰ "Appendix to the History of the Calhoun Monument, Published in 1888," p. 2, offprint, Calhoun Pamphlets #5 1/2 (Published Materials Division, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.).

⁷¹ Entry for December 2, 1895, p. 20, Holmes Diary.

⁷² "The Calhoun Monuments," *Harper's Weekly*, April 3, 1897, p. 343. Newspaper accounts used similar language when they described local reactions to the second Calhoun Monument. "Many a pickanniny is wondering where the new [statue] . . . came from," reported the *News and Courier* shortly before the monument was installed. "A Picture in Bronze," *Charleston News and Courier*, June 10, 1896, p. 3.

⁷³ "The Calhoun Monument," *Charleston News and Courier*, October 31, 1895, p. 8 (quotation); "A Picture in Bronze," *ibid.*, June 10, 1896, p. 3; Brown, "Monumental Legacy," 148.



Figure 3. Second Calhoun Monument. Men pose in front of the second, much taller Calhoun Monument. *From Charleston and Its Exposition, ca. 1901–1902; courtesy of Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.*

It is not a stretch, therefore, to conclude that black ridicule played a role in the LCMA's decision in 1896 to replace the original statue with a monument created by New York sculptor John Massey Rhind (see Figure 3).⁷⁴ But for many local blacks, the decision to build a second, much taller memorial was the direct outcome of their actions, not their words. While official accounts acknowledge the myriad aesthetic reservations, sprinkling in the occasional references to "Mr. Calhoun an' he Wife," local black memory places the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of African Americans who sought to damage the monument.⁷⁵ Mamie Fields recalls that when she was a girl, Charleston leaders decided to "put up a life-size figure of John C. Calhoun preaching."

⁷⁴ Rhind's monument depicted a caped Calhoun, standing high atop a fluted column. The base of the monument was adorned with palmetto trees as well as inscriptions to the LCMA's campaign to erect the monument. It also included reliefs that made gestures to Calhoun's early stance as a war hawk and later career as a states' rights advocate. "The Calhoun Monuments," *Harper's Weekly*, April 3, 1897, p. 343; "History in Monuments," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 2, 1897, p. 18; Brown, "Monumental Legacy," 148–49.

⁷⁵ Edmund L. Drago, *Initiative, Paternalism, and Race Relations: Charleston's Avery Normal Institute* (Athens, Ga., 1990), 6.

This angered black Charlestonians, who felt that Calhoun constantly reminded them that even if they were no longer enslaved, they still had to stay in their place. So, Fields explained, “we used to carry something with us, if we knew we would be passing that way, in order to deface the statue—scratch up the coat, break the watch chain, try to knock off the nose Children and adults beat up John C. Calhoun so badly that the whites had to come back and put him way up high, so we couldn’t get to him.”⁷⁶

Efforts to corroborate this oral history have been unsuccessful, and extant evidence about the decision to replace the original Calhoun Monument is inconclusive.⁷⁷ The sheer size of the column on which the second statue rests, on the one hand, seems to bolster the claim that whites wanted to prevent attempts to scratch Calhoun’s coat or knock off his nose.⁷⁸ The original statue’s thirty-foot base, on the other hand, puts the bronze statue out of the immediate reach of most would-be vandals, casting doubt on the idea that the large column was primarily a preventative measure.⁷⁹ Yet there is evidence to suggest that even if the decision to build a second, larger Calhoun Monument was not premised on black vandalism, Charleston leaders were nonetheless concerned about the defacement of public spaces, including Marion Square, in the mid-1890s. A December 1894 *News and Courier* article denounced widespread graffiti in the city, as well as “rough usage” of the city’s parks.⁸⁰ Not long thereafter, the commissioners of Marion Square hired

⁷⁶ Mamie Fields, *Lemon Swamp*, 57.

⁷⁷ Karen Fields, “What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly,” 156–58.

⁷⁸ Estimates of the size of both monuments vary. Depending on the source, the second Calhoun Monument stands between 80 and 115 feet tall. The first monument was significantly shorter. While the *Baltimore Sun* and *Charleston News and Courier* report that it was 48 feet tall, the *Boston Daily Globe* indicates that it was 59 feet high. All accounts, however, point out that the first bronze figure of Calhoun was between 14 and 15 feet tall. Since sketches of both the model and the actual monument reveal that the Calhoun figure constituted about one-third of the entire monument, it seems fair to assume that the 48-foot estimate is accurate. “In Memory of Calhoun,” *Boston Daily Globe*, April 26, 1887, p. 1; “In Honor of Calhoun: Unveiling of His Statue,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 27, 1887, p. 1 (supplement); “The Great Carolinian,” *Charleston News and Courier*, April 26, 1887, p. 2; “In Memory of Calhoun,” *New York Times*, November 25, 1894, p. 21; “The Calhoun Monument at Charleston,” *Harper’s Weekly*, March 12, 1887, p. 189; “The Calhoun Monument,” *Charleston News and Courier*, October 31, 1895, p. 8; “Calhoun Statue Quelled Furor,” *Charleston News and Courier*, October 23, 1972, p. B1; Brown, “Monumental Legacy,” 148; Drago, *Initiative, Paternalism, and Race Relations*, 1; Robert Pringle, “Conservation Proposal: John C. Calhoun Monument,” July 14, 1987, Public Monuments Project Folder (Historic Charleston Foundation, Charleston, S.C.); Conservation Solutions, Incorporated, “John C. Calhoun Monument” (2003), <http://www.conservationssolution.com/docs/John%20Calhoun%201pager%20-%20final.pdf>.

⁷⁹ So, too, does the fact that one of the first plans for a monument to Calhoun, floated in the 1850s, called for his statue to rest on an even larger Doric column. Brown, “Monumental Legacy,” 136.

⁸⁰ “Concerning Chalk Marks,” *Charleston News and Courier*, December 2, 1894, p. 6.

"a new keeper of the Square" to limit "the nuisances and depredations now committed by goats, boys and night prowlers."⁸¹ Two years later, the commissioners recommended the passage of regulations to protect Marion Square, particularly the recently installed second Calhoun Monument, which they called "the most striking ornament to the city." The new measures outlawed "[t]he digging up of pebbles on the drill ground, the throwing of the same, or of rocks, brickbats, or other missiles; the marking, cutting, or otherwise injuring or defacing the trees, tree boxes or fencing, or the Calhoun Monument." "[P]roper enforcement of these regulations," the commissioners added, necessitated "a more active and systematic co-operation of the Police Department." They thus recommended that Charleston's police force patrol the area from 6:00 P.M. until 6:00 A.M.—the "period that much of the nuisances and defacements occur."⁸²

Marion Square commissioners continued to call for a police presence in the park—apparently to no avail—well into the twentieth century.⁸³ They also noted ongoing vandalism of the second Calhoun Monument. "It seems impossible to stop the practice of small boys throwing pebbles at the bronze tablets" at the base of the monument, reported the commissioners in 1915.⁸⁴ They therefore requested the installation of two lights next to the monument. By 1922 these lights, too, had become a target, and the commissioners urged police protection for the square yet again. In addition to a mention of children tossing pebbles, the 1922 report speculated that "other parties probably who may be maliciously inclined" were the likely culprits.⁸⁵ Although official sources make no mention of racial motivations, oral history indicates that at least some of the vandals attacked the monument because of Calhoun's outspoken stance on slavery. In a 1984 interview, for example, Lucille Williams recalled that an African American classmate from the Avery Normal Institute threw rocks at the second Calhoun Monument as late as the mid-1930s because the antebellum politician "didn't like us."⁸⁶

⁸¹ *Year Book—1894: City of Charleston, So. Ca.* (Charleston, S.C., 1895), 195 (quotation); Brown, "Monumental Legacy," 156n57.

⁸² *Year Book, 1896: City of Charleston, So. Ca.* (Charleston, S.C., 1897), 257–58.

⁸³ See, for example, *Year Book, 1911: City of Charleston, So. Ca.* (Charleston, S.C., 1911), 257.

⁸⁴ *Year Book, 1914: City of Charleston, South Carolina* (Charleston, S.C., 1915), 293.

⁸⁵ *Year Book, 1922: City of Charleston, South Carolina* (Charleston, S.C., 1924), 405.

⁸⁶ Lucille A. Williams, interview with Edmund L. Drago, September 25, 1984, Folder 69, Box 3, Edmund L. Drago Papers (Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, S.C.) (quotation); Drago, *Initiative, Paternalism, and Race Relations*, 6, 187.

Black protest against the first and second Calhoun Monuments was constant but diffuse, a collection of individual acts that never coalesced into an organized movement to remove the memorials from Marion Square. Given the psychic and symbolic power Calhoun held for white Charlestonians, African Americans perhaps reasoned that such a campaign was doomed to fail or, at the very least, not worth the potential backlash. In 1901, however, a development at the old Washington Race Course precipitated a more collective response. It dealt not with the Martyrs of the Race Course cemetery (which by this point was gone) but rather with a new monument proposed for the South Carolina Interstate and West Indian Exposition, a world's fair held at the track in 1901–1902. The exposition was intended to promote the area's natural resources and industrial might, but it also exposed the ongoing struggle over how the city's racial history and politics would be represented in the public landscape. The racial climate in which this particular debate unfolded was arguably worse than it had been in the immediate postwar years. In 1895 a new state constitution had achieved almost universal black disenfranchisement, as lynching across the upcountry reached epidemic proportions.⁸⁷ Though the racial violence that plagued the rest of the state was largely absent in Charleston, a host of Jim Crow laws began to circumscribe black horizons in the city as the nineteenth century came to a close. By 1900, just one year before the exposition controversy erupted, "white only" and "colored" signs blanketed Charleston's public accommodations.⁸⁸

Keeping with the precedent set at other southern fairs of this era, the exposition's board of directors constructed a Negro Building as one of the attractions.⁸⁹ Intended as a testament to both the progress of southern blacks since the Civil War and the paternalism of whites who claimed to nurture it, the Negro Building was officially overseen by Booker T. Washington. The board chose prominent local blacks to supervise the construction of the building, raise funds, and solicit

⁸⁷ Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888–1908* (Chapel Hill, 2001), esp. 91–115; Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill, 2000); Bruce E. Baker, *This Mob Will Surely Take My Life: Lynching in the Carolinas, 1871–1947* (New York, 2008); Terence Finnegan, "Lynching and Political Power in Mississippi and South Carolina," in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 189–218.

⁸⁸ Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!* 336.

⁸⁹ For a comparison of the Negro Departments at the turn-of-the-century expositions in Atlanta, Nashville, and Charleston, see Harvey, "World's Fairs in a Southern Accent," 287–337. For more on the Negro Building at the Atlanta exposition, see Theda Perdue, *Race and the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition of 1895* (Athens, Ga., 2010), 15–23, 32–42.

exhibits. William D. Crum and Thomas E. Miller headed this group.⁹⁰ Crum, a friend of Booker T. Washington's, was a native Charlestonian who had earned a medical degree at Howard University before returning home in the early 1880s to practice. Active in Republican Party politics, Crum was appointed Charleston's postmaster by President Benjamin Harrison in 1892 but withdrew his name after whites objected.⁹¹ Still, Crum enjoyed a good reputation among white Charlestonians because he acquiesced to racial mores that demanded black subservience.⁹² Since 1874 Miller, a vociferous champion of the political gains of Reconstruction, had served as a Republican state representative, state senator, and congressman. One of only six black delegates to the 1895 state constitutional convention at which blacks were disenfranchised, Miller offered an eloquent but ineffective defense of black rights.⁹³ By the late 1890s, Miller's optimism and radicalism had largely faded, at least publicly. In his capacity as president of the Colored Normal, Industrial, Agricultural and Mechanical College of South Carolina (later South Carolina State), Miller bemoaned the futility of politics, insisting that blacks should rely on the benevolence of their white neighbors and seek economic advancement through agricultural and mechanical training.⁹⁴ It was a change of heart that likely stemmed from his institution's dependence on white patronage. Indeed, Miller had to consult the college's white board of trustees about even the smallest decisions.⁹⁵ To the exposition's board of directors, Miller and Crum probably seemed ideal choices for a collaboration that, from the board's point of view, required a good deal of deference.

The location of the Negro Building revealed the exhibit's marginal importance to the exposition directors. Situated in a grove of oaks near the Ashley River, the building (along with the Women's Building)

⁹⁰ John C. Hemphill, "A Short Story of the South Carolina Inter-state and West Indian Exposition," in *Year Book, 1902: City of Charleston, So. Ca.* (Charleston, S.C., 1903), appendix, 105–71, esp. 138–39.

⁹¹ Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901–1915* (New York, 1983), 19–20.

⁹² Francis Butler Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, *South Carolinian* (Baton Rouge, 1944), 416.

⁹³ George Brown Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes, 1877–1900* (Columbia, S.C., 1952), 81, 83–84.

⁹⁴ Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant*, 81; William C. Hine, "Thomas E. Miller and the Early Years of South Carolina State University," *Carologue: Bulletin of the South Carolina Historical Society*, 12 (Winter 1996), 11–12. Despite his inability to protect black suffrage, it was Miller who succeeded in winning support for the creation of South Carolina State at the 1895 convention.

⁹⁵ Hine, "Thomas E. Miller," 11–12.

sat away from the central Court of Palaces that served as the fair's focal point. The white directors went even further, attempting to put their own imprint on the Negro Building—or, more accurately, in front of it—by commissioning a statue as a tribute to blacks and their role in the New South. Entitled *The Negro Group*, the sculpture was designed by Bradford Lee Gilbert, the white, New York-based architect in charge of the entire exposition, and was executed by artist Charles Lopez. It was covered in stucco, a building material made from plaster, cement, and hemp to resemble stone, and consisted of three figures.⁹⁶ In the middle stood a woman balancing a basket of cotton on her head and holding a pitcher of water in her hand. On one side was a kneeling, shirtless man resting on a plow with one hand and leaning on an anvil with the other. His face was sculpted to resemble Booker T. Washington. Flanking the woman on the other side was a younger man in an artisan's apron strumming a banjo. Tobacco, cotton, and bananas surrounded the tableau on the pedestal. (See Figure 4.) Gilbert believed the group was "dignified," with everyone "occupied with some special industry," and predicted that the statue would be "one of the finest on the grounds."⁹⁷

But the statue sparked controversy even before the exposition opened to the public. Reporting on the uproar, members of the national press and local whites feigned incomprehension. The *Exposition*, the official publication of the fair, stated that "it was difficult to divine exactly" what the objection was.⁹⁸ The *New York Times* concurred, noting that "[n]o white Charlestonian seems to know what the protestants had in their minds."⁹⁹ Yet the Reverend F. W. Robinson of Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, who led the opposition to the statue, was pointed in his criticism. He complained that the statue portrayed blacks as menial laborers.¹⁰⁰ Thomas Miller informed Booker T. Washington that Robinson represented the views

⁹⁶ Stucco was used to create most of the buildings and statuary at world's fairs of the period, including those at the Charleston exposition. W. D. Parsons, "Charleston and the Exposition with Impressions of the South," *Inter-State Journal: An Illustrated Monthly of the Connecticut Valley*, 4–5 (March–April 1902), n.p.; "Charleston and Her 'West Indian Exposition,'" *American Monthly Review of Reviews*, 25 (January 1902), 60; "A Trip to Hampton Park," *Charleston News and Courier*, August 14, 1903, p. 8; Moses P. Handy, ed., *The Official Directory of the World's Columbian Exposition, May 1st to October 30th, 1893: A Reference Book* (Chicago, 1893), 203–4.

⁹⁷ Bradford Lee Gilbert to Booker T. Washington, June 4, 1901, in Louis R. Harlan et al., eds., *The Booker T. Washington Papers* (14 vols.; Urbana, 1972–1989), VI, 145.

⁹⁸ "The Negro Group," *Exposition*, November 1901, p. 470.

⁹⁹ "Charleston and Its Exposition," *New York Times*, December 1, 1901, p. SM10. See also T. Cuyler Smith, "The Charleston Exposition," *Independent*, January 16, 1902, pp. 146, 148.

¹⁰⁰ "Negroes Dislike a Statue," *Washington Post*, November 17, 1901, p. 8; "The Negro Group," *Exposition*, November 1901, p. 470.



Figure 4. *The Negro Group*. Intended as a tribute to African Americans' role in the New South, *The Negro Group* was criticized for portraying Charleston blacks as menial laborers. Thomas E. Miller called the banjo player "a blank idiot." *Courtesy of Special Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston; and the Lowcountry Digital Library.*

of a vocal constituency of local blacks. The statue, Miller wrote Washington, "is being condemned by every hopeful, aspiring, self respecting Negro of both sexes; and if it remains there it will bring our work into reproach and make the Negro end of this magnificent Exposition a loathsome thing and a byword." Miller admitted to Washington that he had, in fact, had reservations about the statue since its unveiling. "I did pray that you would have found words with which to make a courteous refusal of the gift," Miller wrote. "Nevertheless," he continued, "if you conclude that the Negro boy with the banjo in hand in the aspect of a blank idiot is a faithful portrayal of yours and mine on the plantation in former days, as your subordinate

I will say 'me too' amen."¹⁰¹ While the white board of directors never explicitly framed *The Negro Group* as a representation of the "docile" slave, Miller—and presumably the protesters in whose behalf he wrote—interpreted it that way. The statue was, in short, an affront to black Charlestonians, a symbolic check on black ambition and ability. It stood as a reminder that many of them had been slaves and that if white Charlestonians had had their way, they still would be.

At a meeting led by Robinson in October 1901, protesters demanded that the statue be removed from the front of the Negro Building, and they drew up a formal request to that effect. Some went so far as to threaten the sculpture's destruction if the request were not honored.¹⁰² To quell the unrest, one of the black managers of the Negro Department, who also worked at Washington's Tuskegee Institute, suggested that a second statue accompany the original, thus "showing the contrast between this ignorant vicious type and the intelligent cultured type."¹⁰³ Another colleague was less sympathetic. "I suppose they wanted Mr. Lopez to represent the negro habited in a silk hat and frock coat," he conjectured, adding, "[The statue] represents the race as the artisan and the tiller of southern soil. This is what the negro is."¹⁰⁴ Washington apparently agreed and did not support the protesters' position. "Mr. Washington and our board," the black manager continued, "have no intention of paying any attention to the clamor that is being raised."¹⁰⁵

It is difficult to know if the managers of the Negro Department (aside from Miller, who disliked the statue immediately) anticipated the outcry over *The Negro Group* or, for that matter, how much input they had in its design. According to the *News and Courier*, Gilbert and Lopez relied heavily on the opinions of artists in New York in conceiving and executing the work; any consultation that may have occurred with Charleston blacks is left unmentioned.¹⁰⁶ Yet, as the protesters made

¹⁰¹ Thomas E. Miller to Booker T. Washington, October 12, 1901, Box 187, Booker T. Washington Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.), microfilm, reel 187.

¹⁰² Hemphill, "Short Story of the South Carolina Inter-state and West Indian Exposition," 139.

¹⁰³ Thomas J. Jackson to Booker T. Washington, October 9, 1901, in Harlan et al., eds., *Booker T. Washington Papers*, VI, 238.

¹⁰⁴ "Negroes Protest Against Statue," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 2, 1901, p. 5. Versions of this article appeared in other newspapers: "Negroes Dislike a Statue," *Washington Post*, November 17, 1901, p. 8; and "The Group of Negro Life in the South," *New York Tribune*, November 3, 1901, p. 14.

¹⁰⁵ "Negroes Protest Against Statue," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 2, 1901, p. 5. Washington himself did not go on record with his opinions about either the statue or the protest.

¹⁰⁶ "A Veritable Work of Art," *Charleston News and Courier*, October 25, 1901, p. 8.

clear, Gilbert, Lopez, and their fellow artists remained heavily indebted to stereotypes about black musicality, subordination, and docility. Indeed, as the nineteenth century came to a close, white southerners wistful for the Old South worked to erect similar monuments to faithful slaves across the region, a movement that climaxed with the ultimately unsuccessful effort to build a mammy memorial in Washington, D.C.¹⁰⁷ Just five years before the exposition in Charleston, a Confederate veteran had erected a loyal slave monument in upcountry Fort Mill, South Carolina, that featured a mammy nurturing a white child and a seated male laborer holding a sickle.¹⁰⁸ Though not, as the Fort Mill monument was, dedicated to “the faithful slaves” who had served white southerners before the war, *The Negro Group* nonetheless embodied the same sentiment to its detractors.¹⁰⁹

Alternative models for depicting blacks, however, were available by the end of the nineteenth century. In the decades after the Civil War, some artists, black and white, presented African Americans in ways that broke free of traditional tropes.¹¹⁰ At the 1895 Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition, the relief that topped the entrance to the Negro Building was designed to highlight black achievements since emancipation.¹¹¹ A “before” panel showed a slave woman and a log cabin; an “after” panel included images of Frederick Douglass and black agricultural laborers, as well as symbols of black progress within the realms of science, art, and literature. And, at the time of the Charleston exposition, Edwin Harleston, Charleston’s most significant African American artist, was just a few years away from returning to the city, where he would spend the next several decades depicting the “Talented Tenth” on canvas. Influenced by W. E. B. Du Bois, with whom he studied at Atlanta University, Harleston painted a series of highly individualized portraits of African Americans—from neighbors and friends to distinguished artists and educators—that explicitly rejected racist caricature.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 284–91; Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 116–59.

¹⁰⁸ For more on the Fort Mill monument, see Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*, 155–61. As Savage notes, the black reaction to the Fort Mill monument is unknown.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹¹⁰ Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D.C., 1990), 79–124; Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill, 2003), 39–82, esp. 66–67, 77–80.

¹¹¹ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 329. For an interpretation of this relief that emphasizes its focus on farming, see Perdue, *Race and the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition*, 34–35.

¹¹² Susan V. Donaldson argues, in fact, that Harleston’s work should be seen as a black counternarrative to the one forged by Charleston’s white elites in the early twentieth century.

While Harleston took cues from Du Bois, the exposition's black managers drew on the ideas of Booker T. Washington, Du Bois's chief rival and the Negro Building's figurehead. Regardless of what they knew about the statue before it was unveiled, the managers' public response to the controversy suggests that they cared less about the politics of representation than they did about the benefits that would accrue to blacks if their end of the exposition proceeded smoothly. If they offered their approval of the plans for *The Negro Group*, it may have resulted from the same calculus: better to let it pass than risk the patronage of Charleston whites. Washington's public accommodationism, after all, undergirded black stewardship of the Negro Department.¹¹³ In the months leading up to the exposition, Washington himself delivered a speech in Charleston that stressed the ways in which the Negro Department would allow African Americans to prove their "worth to the country."¹¹⁴ Miller echoed Washington's views in his own address celebrating the department's opening in January 1902. Speaking to a crowd that included the exposition directors, Miller eschewed social equality as pure "bosh" and argued that "croaking and fault-finding and whining and pining" were not the way for his fellow citizens to right the wrongs committed against them.¹¹⁵ The concerns about the statue that he had raised in his private correspondence

Donaldson, "Charleston's Racial Politics of Historic Preservation: The Case of Edwin A. Harleston," in James M. Hutchisson and Harlan Greene, eds., *Renaissance in Charleston: Art and Life in the Carolina Low Country, 1900–1940* (Athens, Ga., 2003), 176–242, esp. 176–85. In her plaster dioramas for the 1907 Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition, black sculptor Meta Warrick pursued a similar political and aesthetic project, explicitly rejecting older modes of representing African Americans in favor of ones that conveyed black agency, progress, and civilization. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "Meta Warrick's 1907 'Negro Tableaux' and (Re)Presenting African American Historical Memory," *Journal of American History*, 89 (March 2003), 1368–1400.

¹¹³ Although Booker T. Washington's racial philosophy has long been criticized as little more than crass accommodationism, recent scholarship paints a more complicated picture. Washington was "publicly conciliatory" toward whites, as Waldo Martin puts it, but in private he campaigned aggressively against Jim Crow and lynching. Waldo Martin, "In Search of Booker T. Washington: *Up From Slavery*, History, and Legend," in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Booker T. Washington and Black Progress: Up From Slavery 100 Years Later* (Gainesville, Fla., 2003), 38–57 (quotation on 40). For more on Washington's approach to race relations, see Michael Rudolph West, *The Education of Booker T. Washington: American Democracy and the Idea of Race Relations* (New York, 2006); Brundage, ed., *Booker T. Washington and Black Progress*; Louis R. Harlan, "Booker T. Washington and the Politics of Accommodation," in John Hope Franklin and August Meier, eds., *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, 1982), 1–18; and Robert J. Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009).

¹¹⁴ Washington, "Extracts from an Address in Charleston, S.C.," September 12, 1901, in Harlan et al., eds., *Booker T. Washington Papers*, VI, 203.

¹¹⁵ Miller quoted in "Negro Day at Exposition," *Charleston News and Courier*, January 2, 1902, p. 8.

with Washington did not find a public audience. As a loyal lieutenant, Miller had said that he would obey Washington's decision regarding the statue. Given Miller's vulnerability as president of the state's only public black college, he may also have felt the controversy did not merit the scrutiny that his criticism might elicit.¹¹⁶

White exposition directors and the local press, for their part, complained that the black opponents of *The Negro Group* were being ungrateful and unreasonable. The *News and Courier* had little patience with the entire episode, condemning "the more ignorant of our colored fellow citizens" for criticizing a statue that was not only "excellent from every point of view" but also "true to life."¹¹⁷ As the paper saw it, *The Negro Group* perfectly embodied the black race, which in recent years the journalists had labeled immoral, lazy, and spendthrift, suited only for farming and industrial work.¹¹⁸ The white directors of the exposition bristled at the fuss as well. Unnerved by the gall of what they labeled "the so-called 'new' negroes of Charleston," they complied with the request to remove the statue, transferring it to the main Court of Palaces where other pieces of sculpture sat. It was moved, in other words, to a far more visible location, where it would be seen by far more fairgoers. "The result of this wholly unexpected and surprising lack of taste on the part of the negroes," according to the *Exposition*, "will be to advertise most widely and display to far greater advantage Mr. Lopez's splendid typical group." The decision must have struck the protesters as nothing less than a deliberate slap in the face. Adding insult to injury, the publication joked that the only legitimate objection to the statue that could be raised stemmed from aesthetic realism. Adopting the persona of what it called a "darkey of the old type," the *Exposition* quipped about the literally white statue, "'Who eber see w'ite nigger? Nobody don' wan' nigger look w'ite like goeses [ghosts].'"¹¹⁹ From this perspective, black protest was little more than another opportunity for racist caricature.

¹¹⁶ Miller had a contentious relationship with the college's white board of trustees, which constantly refused his requests for greater authority at the institution. He was ultimately ousted from the presidency when, as William C. Hine has noted, he "violated his own advice that black men steer clear of politics" and campaigned against Coleman L. Blease in the 1910 governor's race. Blease, a trustee who opposed black education, forced Miller to resign. Hine, "Thomas E. Miller," 12; Ernest McPherson Lander Jr., *A History of South Carolina, 1865–1960* (Chapel Hill, 1960), 154.

¹¹⁷ Untitled article, *Charleston News and Courier*, October 24, 1901, p. 4 (first and third quotations); "A Veritable Work of Art," *ibid.*, October 25, 1901, p. 8 (second quotation).

¹¹⁸ Harvey, "World's Fairs in a Southern Accent," 325.

¹¹⁹ "The Negro Group," *Exposition*, November 1901, p. 470.

At one point during the controversy, the *News and Courier* did concede that "it was to have been expected" that some local blacks might not like the statue.¹²⁰ The paper thereby injected a rare moment of candor into a white response otherwise characterized by incredulity and derision. Despite all protests to the contrary, the city's white ruling elite had apparently assumed that *The Negro Group* would raise the ire of some black Charlestonians. Yet white foresight still had its blind spots, as the exposition managers failed to anticipate the price they would pay for commissioning the statue, let alone for moving it to a more central location on the exposition grounds. In fact, the skirmish over *The Negro Group*, combined with the exposition's inadequate facilities for blacks, resulted in what the *New York Age* called a black "boycott" of the festivities.¹²¹ William Crum provided a frank postmortem a few years later in the *Voice of the Negro*. Inferior Jim Crow railroad accommodations, he noted, had dissuaded some blacks from attending, "while other incidents," Crum added rather drily, "made them feel that they were not as welcome as their money. These facts kept many away; 'still the wonder grew' among the whites why more Negroes did not visit the Charleston Exposition."¹²² By the time the exposition closed, the white directors could no longer ignore the consequences of their actions. In the final report on the exposition, they observed that *The Negro Group* had attracted "more attention . . . than it would have received in the place for which it was designed," linking this fact to the "distinctly disappointing" returns the Negro Department generated.¹²³

The opponents of *The Negro Group*, in sum, contributed to the exposition's financial woes, but the significance of this victory was short-lived.¹²⁴ When the fair was over in the spring of 1902, the city of Charleston acquired the exposition statues as a part of its purchase of the Washington Race Course, which it turned into a public park. *The Negro Group* was one of several statues placed on permanent display, the city stated, to "attract the interest of lovers of art and add materially to the beauty . . . of the park."¹²⁵ The black response to this move is

¹²⁰ Untitled article, *Charleston News and Courier*, October 24, 1901, p. 4.

¹²¹ *New York Age* quoted in "The Negro at the Exposition," *Charleston News and Courier*, April 29, 1902, p. 4.

¹²² William D. Crum, "The Negro at the Charleston Exposition," *Voice of the Negro*, 1 (August 1904), 335.

¹²³ Hemphill, "Short Story of the South Carolina Inter-state and West Indian Exposition," 139.

¹²⁴ The exposition's financial returns were so poor that it became the first event of its kind to be put into receivership. *Ibid.*, 107; Harvey, "World's Fairs in a Southern Accent," 348–49.

¹²⁵ *Year Book, 1903: City of Charleston, So. Ca.* (Charleston, S.C., 1904), 146 (quotation); Hemphill, "Short Story of the South Carolina Inter-state and West Indian Exposition," 171.

unknown. So, too, is the African American reaction to the city council's unanimous decision in 1904 to rename the space Hampton Park.¹²⁶ Wade Hampton had died in April 1902, during the exposition, which came to a standstill for several days as white Charlestonians mourned the man they viewed as a savior.¹²⁷ In his 1876 quest for the governorship, the former Confederate general and his supporters, the Red Shirts, had pursued a campaign of intimidation and violence that ended Reconstruction and "redeemed" South Carolina from Republican rule. Renaming the park in Hampton's honor was the final act of Redemption. Dedicated by black Charlestonians to the loyalty of Union soldiers in 1865, the old Washington Race Course was now the symbolic home of loyalty to white supremacy. And the fact that the residents of the surrounding neighborhoods were disproportionately—and increasingly—black made this change all the more significant.¹²⁸

As the struggles over the Martyrs of the Race Course cemetery, the Calhoun monuments, and *The Negro Group* make clear, black Charlestonians did not sit idly by as whites attempted to define the meaning of the city's public spaces in the postbellum period. In many ways, the recent effort to install a memorial to Denmark Vesey has built on this period of activism. Yet if the Vesey Monument campaign has been an extension of this earlier activism, it is, at the same time, a testament to its limits. White control of the city's public memory proved tenacious in the postbellum period. African American efforts failed to permanently alter either that control or public memory, and their last concerted attempt to do so in 1902 marked the beginning of a long silence that was rarely broken until Henry Darby spoke out in the 1990s. In part, black efforts to control the commemorative landscape diminished because of the ascendancy of legalized segregation. Equally, if not more important, however, was the way elite white Charlestonians began to pursue their own memory work in the early decades of the twentieth century. As they became increasingly

Visitors to the park in the years after the exposition reported that the staff-covered statues quickly began to peel apart. The city made efforts to preserve the statues—repainting them in 1903 and 1904—but they did not survive for long. By 1906 the damage had become so severe that the city removed all the statuary. "Now for Hampton Park," *Charleston News and Courier*, September 10, 1903, p. 8; "A Trip to Hampton Park," *ibid.*, August 14, 1903, p. 8; "With Paint and Shellac," *ibid.*, November 2, 1904, p. 5; *Year Book, 1904: City of Charleston, So. Ca.* (Charleston, S.C., 1905), 207; "Out at Hampton Park," *Charleston News and Courier*, August 9, 1906, p. 8.

¹²⁶ *Year Book, 1903*, p. 144.

¹²⁷ Lillian W. Betts, "Sunny Days at the Exposition," *Outlook*, May 10, 1902, pp. 123–24.

¹²⁸ Radford, "Race, Residence and Ideology," 333–46; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!* 338.

invested in both historical preservation and tourism, local whites recast the repositories of historical memory by turning to the vernacular cityscape rather than symbolic statuary and public space.¹²⁹ This change made it more difficult for blacks to write their history, as well as any recognition of slavery, into the public landscape.

Historical preservationists organized first. Alarmed by the gradual encroachment of modernity in Charleston, a female-led group called the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings (SPOD) came together in 1920 to save some of the city's most magnificent homes, restore them to their former grandeur, and open them to the public. By the late 1920s, the SPOD, reorganized under male leadership, lobbied local, state, and federal governments for help. Its efforts were rewarded. Receiving tax exemptions for several historical homes and federal funding for its projects, the organization also succeeded in 1931 in obtaining a zoning ordinance that created a twenty-three-block "Old and Historic District" of protected buildings and the Board of Architectural Review to approve changes therein.¹³⁰ The private spaces of the white elite, in other words, became the sites of official public memory, sanctioned and supported by the weight of individual white citizens and government institutions alike.

The stories these structures told hid the unseemly side of the city's history. The women of the SPOD framed the homes they rescued as windows into the romance of domesticity and family. Keeping with the Colonial Revival fashion of their day, Charleston preservationists also emphasized the colonial and Revolutionary significance of the homes they guarded. By the late 1930s, they played to the craze for the "genteel" culture of the antebellum South unleashed by the publication of *Gone with the Wind* (1936).¹³¹ Not surprisingly, slavery was left out of the past these homes presented to visitors, despite the fact that slaves had built, lived in, and labored on the properties. Compounding this historical erasure was a campaign to remove African Americans from homes and neighborhoods deemed historically significant, a process that continued well into the post-World War II period with the continued

¹²⁹ White Charlestonians, however, did not abandon statuary altogether. Monuments to Wade Hampton in Marion Square and to Charleston's Confederate defenders in White Point Garden were unveiled in 1912 and 1932, respectively. "The Shaft to Hampton," *Charleston News and Courier*, March 28, 1912, p. 4; Robert N. Rosen, *Confederate Charleston: An Illustrated History of the City and the People during the Civil War* (Columbia, S.C., 1994), 158.

¹³⁰ Yuhl, *Golden Haze of Memory*, 43. For more on this early preservationist movement in Charleston, see *ibid.*, 20–52; and Yuhl, "Rich and Tender Remembering."

¹³¹ Yuhl, *Golden Haze of Memory*, 173.

expansion of the historical district.¹³² Although blacks and whites had lived side by side for centuries—with blacks during Jim Crow often occupying the former slave quarters located behind grand homes—the preservationist vision of Charleston's past was lily-white.

The birth of a modern tourism industry in Charleston bolstered the sanitization of the cityscape.¹³³ In an effort to revive its dismal economy, the city had built a tourist infrastructure—a tourism bureau, elegant hotels, and serviceable roads—by the end of the 1920s. The promotional literature that accompanied this tourist boom featured a historical narrative that became—and essentially still is—the official history of Charleston. Guidebooks emphasized the opulence and social harmony of days gone by, while largely ignoring slavery. When the institution was discussed, it was framed as benign and natural. An early guidebook argued that “the condition of the Southern slave was the best of any peasantry in the world.”¹³⁴ Another publication observed that slavery was “suited admirably . . . to the temperament of the Low-Country Negro.”¹³⁵ In 1952 this version of Charleston's history became even more entrenched when the city began a licensing program that required prospective guides to master these tenets.¹³⁶

By locating their historical memory in the built landscape of the city, and by teaching both locals and tourists how to navigate it, whites had removed the most troubling aspects of Charleston's past from its public spaces by the middle of the twentieth century. The sheer scale of this achievement made it hard for blacks to launch a meaningful challenge. It was one thing to protest a statue that honored a proslavery politician; it was quite another to dislodge a historical memory that was made manifest everywhere the eye turned, especially when many private spaces were deployed in its service. In her study of Charleston during the interwar years, Stephanie E. Yuhl finds no evidence of African American resistance to the cultural activities

¹³² *Ibid.*, 31, 45–50. For post–World War II preservation efforts and the effects on blacks, see Robert R. Weyeneth, *Historic Preservation for a Living City: Historic Charleston Foundation, 1947–1997* (Columbia, S.C., 2000), 55–71.

¹³³ Both Yuhl and Brundage discuss the emergence of Charleston's early tourism industry in detail. Yuhl, *Golden Haze of Memory*, 157–88; Brundage, *Southern Past*, 183–226.

¹³⁴ *Guide to Charleston, S.C. with Brief History of City and Map Showing Ward Boundaries and Places of Interest* (Charleston, S.C., 1911), 49 (copy in SCR, CCPL).

¹³⁵ Samuel Gaillard Stoney, *Charleston: Azaleas and Old Bricks* (Boston, 1937), 9.

¹³⁶ Minutes, January 31, 1952, Folder “Rough Minutes/Agendas 1952,” Box 2; and 1952 Annual Report, Folder “Annual Reports 1945–56,” Box 1, both in Records of the Historical Commission of Charleston (SCR, CCPL). This narrative has continued to form the basis of the tour guide training program in more recent decades. Robert Stockton, ed., *Information for Guides of Historic Charleston* (Charleston, S.C., 1985) (copy in SCR, CCPL).

undertaken by white Charlestonians. As she argues, many blacks were poor and thus preoccupied with making a living, while those with more resources focused their efforts on uplift activities.¹³⁷

Despite the institutionalization of this whitewashed historical narrative, black memory was sustained and nurtured in early- to mid-twentieth-century Charleston. Fourth of July celebrations provided a highly visible forum for its preservation. According to an unwritten rule, black Charlestonians were prohibited from White Point Garden, the park at the Battery, with the exception of the Fourth, which was considered “a Yankee holiday,” as Mamie Fields has put it. Every year, blacks appropriated the space to commemorate the day with food, music, and a program that tied the occasion directly to the death of slavery. Children sang “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and recited the Emancipation Proclamation and other “pieces” from Abraham Lincoln. Most moving was the reading of Frederick Douglass’s antislavery speeches, which, remembered Fields, “many people knew by heart.”¹³⁸ Black clubwomen in Charleston acted as guardians of this past, too. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, members of the Phillis Wheatley Literary and Social Club bought works of black literature and history, which they read and discussed at club meetings. They also attempted to expand the holdings of local libraries, requesting in 1931, for example, that the Charleston Public Library system acquire books “especially by Negro authors.”¹³⁹

Black schools were among the most important repositories of black memory in Charleston. Until 1920, public schools for African American children in the city were staffed by white teachers who did their best to impart the tenets of the Lost Cause, but private schools taught black history, including the history of slavery. Mamie Fields recalled attending her cousin Lala’s school, where Lala taught the subject with a profoundly personal touch. “It was from her,” Fields later wrote, “that I learned about slavery as our relatives had experienced it and what it meant. She taught us how strong our ancestors back in slavery were and what fine people they were.”¹⁴⁰ Lala paired these lessons with a critical reading of the city’s public landscape and the historical narrative that whites had begun to inscribe. In a blatant disregard of local custom, she

¹³⁷ Yuhl, *Golden Haze of Memory*, 15.

¹³⁸ Mamie Fields, *Lemon Swamp*, 55–56.

¹³⁹ Club minutes quoted in Joan Marie Johnson, “‘Drill into us . . . the Rebel tradition’: The Contest over Southern Identity in Black and White Women’s Clubs, South Carolina, 1898–1930,” *Journal of Southern History*, 66 (August 2000), 525–62 (quotation on 557–58).

¹⁴⁰ Mamie Fields, *Lemon Swamp*, 45.

took students to the Battery, where they pondered a number of queries: "Why were those cannons there and in whose honor?" How did the people who lived along the Battery "get the money to build such great big houses?" At Lala's school, Fields and her classmates were told of how white Charlestonians had accumulated their wealth and of how they had fought a war to protect the institution that generated it.¹⁴¹ The Avery Normal Institute, the most prominent school for African Americans in Charleston, boasted a curriculum that was shaped by northern missionaries with abolitionist leanings as well as by several members of the Phillis Wheatley Club who were teachers there.¹⁴² Studying in classrooms named Lincoln, Sumner, Grant, and Liberty, Avery students learned about the antislavery movement, black heroes and martyrs like Robert Smalls, Toussaint Louverture, and Crispus Attucks, and even African history.¹⁴³ Well into the twentieth century, teachers at black public schools in surrounding counties took advantage of a lack of white oversight to incorporate black history into their curricula.¹⁴⁴ And, in cases where schools neglected black memory and history, the family might step into the breach. Sonya Fordham, who attended Charleston public schools in the 1950s and 1960s, remembered hearing very little about slavery at school, but at home things were different: "My family talked about slavery every Saturday. It was our Saturday thing."¹⁴⁵ Each week, her grandmother took her to the plantation where her family had labored, pointing out the unmarked graves of deceased slave ancestors. "She wanted me to know, because Philip Lucas, who was the patriarch of the family, always told the family to tell the children what happened, to not let the children forget what slavery was."¹⁴⁶

This black memory was not altogether sealed off from the rest of the city. From 1938 to 1987, the Old Slave Mart Museum, located on the grounds of a former slave market, displayed artifacts made by slaves.¹⁴⁷ The Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture,

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 53 (quotations); Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill, 2009), 42.

¹⁴² Johnson, "'Drill into us . . . the Rebel tradition,'" 557.

¹⁴³ Drago, *Initiative, Paternalism, and Race Relations*, 110–11.

¹⁴⁴ Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 70.

¹⁴⁵ Sonya Fordham, "A Conversation with Edward Ball," in Edward Ball, *Slaves in the Family* (1998; new ed., New York, 2001), 513.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 514.

¹⁴⁷ The Old Slave Mart Museum closed in 1987 and was bought by the city shortly thereafter. For almost twenty years, its future was uncertain. The museum reopened in October 2007 following an extensive renovation and now provides visitors a sobering look at the slave trade.

housed at the former Avery Normal Institute, opened in 1985 to preserve and promote black history in the Lowcountry. Neither institution occupied visible public space, however, and the Old Slave Mart Museum offered a paternalistic interpretation of slavery. Citizens and civic leaders, moreover, continually challenged the accurate claim made by the museum's owner (a midwestern native who had moved to Charleston) that slaves had been sold at the site.¹⁴⁸

Charleston's history of slavery in general, and the Vesey conspiracy in particular, began to emerge from the shadows more fully during the civil rights protests of the 1960s. In March 1969, for example, over five hundred black women who worked at the Medical College Hospital and at the Charleston County Hospital went on strike demanding better wages and an end to discrimination against union members. Facing off against five thousand National Guardsmen, protesters took to the streets, shouting, "Remember Denmark Vesey!"¹⁴⁹ Even some white Charlestonians interpreted the hospital workers' strike through the lens of the city's most famous slave rebel. Liberal poet Alice Cabaniss wrote, "Merchants lounge in doorways / cursing ease, grouping angrily / . . . patrolling windows, / counting guardsmen going by. / . . . Denmark Vesey smiles / with pleasure from another century."¹⁵⁰

Within the next decade, as black Charlestonians gained more political clout in the city—a development that many attributed to the strike—one public official attempted to bring Vesey front and center.¹⁵¹ In 1976 Joseph P. Riley Jr., a white racial progressive who had recently been elected mayor, commissioned a portrait of Denmark Vesey to hang in Gaillard Municipal Auditorium. A product of the city's changing political order, Riley had called for a "new age of tolerance, harmony, and creativity" and won 75 percent of the black vote.¹⁵² He hoped the painting would teach the city about its neglected black history and that the black community would embrace his act as a gesture of goodwill. The overture, however, was met with vocal white opposition. The painting was stolen, reappearing only after the mayor threatened to commission a replacement if the original were

¹⁴⁸ Stephanie Yuhl, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Re-centering the Domestic Slave Trade in American Public History," unpublished paper in authors' possession.

¹⁴⁹ David Robertson, *Denmark Vesey* (New York, 1999), 129 (quotation); Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of the Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199* (Urbana, 1989), 129–58.

¹⁵⁰ Alice Cabaness [sic], "Strike and Curfew," *New South*, 24 (Summer 1969), 44; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!* 422–23.

¹⁵¹ Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*, 155.

¹⁵² Joseph P. Riley Jr. quoted in Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!* 429.

not returned.¹⁵³ Twenty-five years later, the South Carolina state legislature erected a monument to black history at the state capitol in Columbia, but only after Vesey's name was eliminated from the original design.¹⁵⁴

These incidents foreshadowed the hostile reception the Vesey Monument proposal has elicited almost from its inception. In the late 1990s, Henry Darby recruited several members of the local black academic community to help him spearhead a project to build a memorial to Vesey in downtown Charleston. Naming their group the Spirit of Freedom Committee (SFC), they approached the city with the Vesey Monument idea. To the committee, Marion Square seemed the logical location. Bound by three major streets, the prominent public square sits at the center of the peninsula, attracting locals and tourists alike. Furthermore, it is home not only to the Calhoun Monument but also to the original Citadel, the arsenal (and later military college) founded in 1825 in the wake of the Vesey conspiracy. According to Darby, these facts made Marion Square "the most profound place" for a public monument to Vesey.¹⁵⁵ Although Mayor Riley supported the idea, the final decision to place the memorial in Marion Square belonged neither to him nor to the city council. Two nineteenth-century militias—the Washington Light Infantry (WLI), which has close historical ties to the Citadel, and the Sumter Guard—own Marion Square and lease it to the city of Charleston for public use.¹⁵⁶ Vesey's twenty-first-century fate was, to a large extent, in their hands, and they were not eager to inscribe Vesey's deeds in stone, at least in their square. In the years after the initial conversation between the parties, the militias' public explanation for rejecting the proposal centered around a practical concern: Marion Square was undergoing a multimillion-dollar renovation financed by the city. The WLI argued that no new monuments should be constructed until the redesign was complete.¹⁵⁷ But when the SFC and the militias originally met to discuss the Vesey plan, it was an ideological objection that loomed largest. Vesey, the militias charged behind closed doors, was a criminal who should not

¹⁵³ For more on the painting, see *ibid.*, 429–30. On its theft, see David Clark, "Traitor, Patriot, Martyr, Murderer: Denmark Vesey, Portrait of a Rebel," *Charleston Post and Courier*, September 30, 1996, pp. B4–B5.

¹⁵⁴ Drew Juber, "Slavery Foe's Legacy," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 11, 2006, p. A1.

¹⁵⁵ Darby, phone interview by Roberts and Kytte.

¹⁵⁶ For more on the Citadel and the Washington Light Infantry, see John P. Thomas, *The History of the South Carolina Military Academy* (Charleston, S.C., 1893).

¹⁵⁷ Elsa McDowell, "Monument's Future Needs Consideration," *Charleston Post and Courier*, January 23, 2001, p. B1.

be memorialized.¹⁵⁸ As a compromise, militia members proposed a monument to slavery as well as to Native Americans, one that could include Vesey but only as a part of a much broader recognition of oppression. Interpreting this alternative as an attempt “to blunt the impact of Vesey,” according to historian and SFC member Bernard Powers, the committee declined the offer and decided to find a new location for the memorial.¹⁵⁹

By 2000 proponents had settled on Hampton Park. Although the park does not attract the same volume of tourist traffic as Marion Square, it has important symbolic ties to Vesey in particular and the city’s century-long struggle to publicly recognize slavery in general. Located adjacent to the current campus of the Citadel (the college moved in 1922), Hampton Park was also home to the original monument to slavery in Charleston: the Martyrs of the Race Course cemetery.¹⁶⁰ The same year the SFC selected this site, it won approval from the city’s Arts and History Commission for its design and secured \$25,000 from the city council to use toward the statue. Not until February 1, 2010, however, was ground broken for the memorial. When it is completed, the monument will feature bronze likenesses of Vesey and two coconspirators, Monday Gell and Gullah Jack Pritchard, on a five-and-a-half-foot granite pedestal. (See Figure 5.) Vesey will be depicted holding a Bible in his left hand and his carpentry tools and hat in his right. The monument will thereby emphasize Vesey’s occupation—he was a skilled carpenter—as well as his religiosity—he taught night classes for Charleston’s AME church. In addition, Ed Dwight, the sculptor commissioned to produce the Vesey Monument, plans to add three bronze storyboards that will cover the origins and aftermath of the conspiracy.¹⁶¹

Raging off and on for over a decade, the debate over the Vesey statue represents, in one respect, a significant departure from earlier struggles. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, white Charlestonians would not have considered opening up the public landscape to a

¹⁵⁸ Darby, phone interview by Roberts and Kytte; Curtis Franks, interview by Kytte, August 14, 2009, Charleston, S.C.; Bernard Powers, phone interview by Roberts and Kytte, February 12, 2010. Although many other parties publicly criticized Vesey as a would-be murderer, the Washington Light Infantry and the Sumter Guard did not do so.

¹⁵⁹ Powers, phone interview by Roberts and Kytte.

¹⁶⁰ On Memorial Day 2010, moreover, a commemorative plaque to the first Decoration Day was unveiled in Hampton Park. Derek Legette, “Reclaiming History: Charleston Commemorates Site of First Memorial Day Celebration,” *Charleston Post and Courier*, June 1, 2010, p. B1.

¹⁶¹ Ed Dwight, “Denmark Vesey Brochure,” unpublished manuscript in authors’ possession; Dwight, e-mail message to Kytte, February 4, 2011; David Slade, “Groundbreaking for Vesey Monument,” *Charleston Post and Courier*, February 2, 2010, p. B1.



Figure 5. Model of Vesey Monument. Denmark Vesey stands in the center holding his Bible, hat, and carpentry tools. He is flanked by two coconspirators, Monday Gell and Gullah Jack Pritchard. *Courtesy of Ed Dwight.*

memorial that attempted to reckon with slavery. Today, when pressed, many concede that such a project is not out of the question. Even those who oppose the SFC's project, such as the members of the militias, admit that slavery mattered to the city's past and can be acknowledged in its monuments.¹⁶²

Notwithstanding this new context, the continuities between the city's early monument-related struggles and the Vesey campaign are striking. Not only is slavery still the concern around which the battle rages; it is also the representation of slavery—and the representation of the enslaved more generally—that remains at issue. The Vesey Monument forces Charlestonians to confront the reality that slaves were

¹⁶² Charles Waring quoted in Jason Hardin, "Historians to Debate Vesey Legacy, Planned Monument," *Charleston Post and Courier*, March 22, 2001, pp. B1 (quotation), B6; Powers, phone interview by Roberts and Kyle.

unhappy, so much so that they, as well as free black sympathizers like Vesey, might violently rebel. It belies, in other words, claims that slavery was benign. As one SFC member put it, "People living in abominable positions will strike out."¹⁶³ Refuting the image of the "docile" slave that had irked Thomas E. Miller and *Negro Group* protesters almost one hundred years earlier, the Vesey Monument offers a vision of slaves as people who were willing to embrace violent resistance as the appropriate response to bondage. Many locals, however, have found this possibility disconcerting. Despite the prevalence of other Charleston monuments that commemorate violent revolutionaries, they argue that violence is beyond the pale.¹⁶⁴ Like the militias, Charles Waring, the lone member of the Charleston Arts and History Commission to vote against the project, denounced Vesey and his coconspirators' alleged methods. Waring said he would support a more general monument to those who fought for their freedom—Vesey included—but insisted that he could not support one for Vesey alone. "Is it appropriate to massacre individuals," Waring asked about Vesey, "or to slowly win one's freedom through the process? That's what it boils down to."¹⁶⁵ Kyle Sinisi, a historian at the Citadel, made a similar case, declaring that he "was not overly enthusiastic about erecting a monument to a man bound and determined to create mayhem."¹⁶⁶ Others have gone further. One woman who wrote to the *Post and Courier* objected to the statue because Vesey's plan was "to kill the entire white population of Charleston." "His grand scheme," she concluded, "was for nothing less than a Holocaust."¹⁶⁷

Although many historians maintain that a wholesale massacre was unlikely, the Vesey plot, along with the monument to commemorate it, still raises questions about slavery that some white Charlestonians

¹⁶³ James Smart quoted in Stratton Lawrence, "'Terrorist' or 'Freedom Fighter'? Efforts to Honor Denmark Vesey Running into Financial, Historical Obstacles," *Charleston City Paper*, April 26, 2006, <http://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/charleston/feature-zwnj-terrorist-or-freedom-fighter/Content?oid=1104620>.

¹⁶⁴ Marion Square, the location initially proposed for the Vesey Monument, is named for Francis Marion, who waged guerrilla warfare against the British during the Revolutionary War. Memorials to Confederate soldiers—like Hampton Park, where the Vesey Monument will sit—also make a prominent appearance in the city's public landscape. At the Battery is a monument to the defenders of the Confederacy; just north of that is Washington Square, a park that pays tribute to both the WLI and General P. G. T. Beauregard; continuing up the peninsula, one finds an obelisk that memorializes General Wade Hampton in Marion Square; and farther north still is Hampton Park itself.

¹⁶⁵ Charles Waring quoted in Hardin, "Historians to Debate Vesey Legacy, Planned Monument," p. B6.

¹⁶⁶ Kyle Sinisi quoted in Lawrence, "'Terrorist' or 'Freedom Fighter'?"

¹⁶⁷ C. Gail Jarvis, letter to the editor, *Charleston Post and Courier*, July 1, 2000, p. A14.

would prefer to ignore.¹⁶⁸ Consider the list of alternative candidates critics have proposed for the monument. Possibilities have included several native-born South Carolina blacks, such as local craftsman Philip Simmons, astronaut Ronald McNair, and pop pioneer Chubby Checker.¹⁶⁹ A former president of the College of Charleston recommended John C. Frémont, an alumnus of the college who, as a Union general, freed slaves in Missouri during the first year of the Civil War.¹⁷⁰ In these plans to make the proposed memorial more palatable, black resistance gives way to black artistry and achievement and even, in the case of Frémont, to white activism.

To those who condemn the memorial outright or seek to alter its form and content, proponents reply that the goal of the project is not to valorize violence. The Vesey Monument will not depict the thwarted rebellion as “acceptable,” explains sculptor Ed Dwight in his preliminary plans. Instead, it will put the conspiracy in its historical context, explicating “why Denmark Vesey and his followers would take such drastic action.”¹⁷¹ According to SFC member Donald West, the point of the memorial is “to acknowledge that [the planned rebellion] was a very significant historical moment.”¹⁷² Even the best-known skeptic of the story about Denmark Vesey—historian Michael P. Johnson, who doubts that a slave uprising was really in the works in 1822—thinks that a monument is justified for similar reasons. In 2001 Johnson published an article questioning the standard narrative of Vesey’s actions, asserting

¹⁶⁸ Historians and advocates of the Vesey Monument admit that violence was central to Vesey’s plot but argue that his larger goal—removing the enslaved to Haiti—casts doubt on the claim that he planned a Holocaust. Hardin, “Historians to Debate Vesey’s Legacy, Planned Monument,” p. B1; Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (New York, 1999), 136.

¹⁶⁹ Online comments on “Groundbreaking on Vesey Monument Set for Today,” *Charleston Post and Courier*, February 1, 2010, <http://www.postandcourier.com/news/2010/feb/01/groundbreaking-vesey-monument-set-today/#comments> (accessed February 16, 2010; URL no longer valid); Elsa McDowell, “The Hunley’s Survivors Would Be Quite a Sight,” *Charleston Post and Courier*, January 27, 2001, p. B1.

¹⁷⁰ Alex Sanders, “Unifying Idea: A Local Statue for Fremont,” *Charleston Post and Courier*, September 10, 2000, p. A15. More recently, liberal columnist Will Moredock suggested that Robert Smalls, who freed himself from slavery and became a Union soldier and later a Reconstruction-era politician, was a “worthy alternative” to Denmark Vesey for fighting “on the right side of history . . . with . . . honor and distinction.” And in May 2012, as a part of the city’s Civil War sesquicentennial commemoration, two historical markers to Smalls were installed at Waterfront Park and the Battery. Will Moredock, “Two Monuments to Forget: We Have Enough Divisive Monuments in This State,” *Charleston City Paper*, February 10, 2010, <http://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/charleston/two-monuments-to-forget/Content?oid=1756177>; Will Moredock, “Charleston Begins to Address Black History with Robert Smalls Memorial,” *ibid.*, May 9, 2012, <http://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/charleston/charleston-begins-to-address-black-history-with-robert-smalls-memorial/Content?oid=4070879>.

¹⁷¹ Dwight, “Denmark Vesey Brochure.”

¹⁷² Donald West, phone interview by Roberts and Kytte, January 22, 2010.

that the conspiracy was actually cooked up by Charleston's mayor to stoke fears of a slave uprising and discredit South Carolina's overly paternalistic governor.¹⁷³ Vesey, in other words, was not the mastermind of a plot to free slaves but the victim of a political conspiracy designed to increase the mayor's power. Still, Johnson has stated, "What was done to [Vesey] was monumental," significant if only for its wide-ranging ramifications.¹⁷⁴ Not only were Vesey and thirty-four others executed, but the event also initiated a crackdown on slavery that included the passage of new laws curtailing the activities of free blacks and slaves alike as well as the founding of the Citadel.

Accepting the disquieting truths about slavery clearly continues to make some Charlestonians uneasy. Yet when another memorial was proposed for Marion Square in the late 1990s, locals registered little distress at all. The Holocaust Memorial, installed by the Charleston Jewish Federation in 1999, pays tribute to victims of the World War II genocide and to survivors who moved to South Carolina. The largest monument in a Charleston city park, it is a testament to the cooperation of the WLI, the Sumter Guard, the City of Charleston, and the Charleston Jewish Federation. Though it commemorates one of the most heinous events in modern history, the Holocaust Memorial elicited no major protest or controversy. Most letters to the *Post and Courier* went on record as supporting the monument, citing the need to remember lest the tragedy happen again. "We have the duty never to forget this event," one man insisted. "Those who perished must live on inside us, their deaths must not have been in vain. We must remember them."¹⁷⁵ A Charleston Jewish Federation member praised the monument on broader grounds: "I have an issue with people who see the Holocaust as simply a Jewish issue. It's a watershed in human history. It shows the power a state can wield against its own citizens."¹⁷⁶ A plaque installed on the monument itself echoes these comments, proclaiming that "we remember the Holocaust to alert ourselves to the dangers of prejudice, to express our outrage at the scourge of racism, and to warn the world that racism can lead to genocide."¹⁷⁷

It is difficult to read these words and not think about the Vesey memorial, designed to recognize a man who died fighting prejudice,

¹⁷³ Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 58 (October 2001), 915–76.

¹⁷⁴ Johnson quoted in Jubera, "Slavery Foe's Legacy."

¹⁷⁵ W. Redd Turner III, letter to the editor, *Charleston Post and Courier*, March 27, 1997, p. A22.

¹⁷⁶ Jennifer Phillips quoted in Robert Behre, "Holocaust Memorial Taking Shape," *Charleston Post and Courier*, August 17, 1998, p. B1.

¹⁷⁷ Plaque, Holocaust Memorial, Marion Square, Charleston, S.C.

racism, and the oppressive power of the state in the name of humanity. This very affinity, in fact, was one of the reasons the SFC pushed to erect its monument when and where it did. Hoping to harness the momentum and goodwill generated by the Holocaust Memorial, the committee urged the city and the militias to see the Vesey Monument as its complement. First proposing the Vesey memorial as the Holocaust Memorial was nearing completion in the late 1990s, committee members wanted, as Bernard Powers recalled, to “develop a kind of intellectual synergy between the two.” In their view, Marion Square, by recognizing the horrors of both slavery and genocide, would become a place to contemplate, in Powers’s words, the “inherent humanity . . . of all people” and “the depths to which human depravity can sink.”¹⁷⁸ The name they chose for their organization—the Spirit of Freedom Committee—was conceived to capture this broad vision of the historical struggle against injustice.

That this strategy failed highlights an enduring reality about public memory in Charleston and the United States more generally: if the Holocaust is easily stripped of its context for the purposes of drawing universal moral lessons, the same is not true for American slavery or slave rebellions. For some, the topic is just too close to home. “Jewish history,” as Henry Darby observed, “does not remind white America of a black past.”¹⁷⁹ By erecting the Holocaust Memorial in Marion Square, yet rejecting the Vesey Monument in the same location, Charleston denounced racism abroad while overlooking a long history of it at home. This commemorative sleight of hand struck some as unseemly. Theodore Rosengarten, a history professor at the College of Charleston who teaches courses on the Holocaust, criticized the Holocaust Memorial for this very reason. “I thought that so long as the people who had built the city of Charleston had yet to be acknowledged in some public fashion,” he recalled, “I felt this was sticking something in people’s faces.”¹⁸⁰

Still, ground was broken for the Vesey Monument in Hampton Park in 2010, suggesting that the struggle to incorporate slavery into the city’s commemorative landscape may finally have been won. Moreover, when the memorial to Vesey is completed, it will not be alone. In 2008 another monument to slavery was unveiled in the metropolitan area. Officially known as A Bench by the Road, this earlier memorial is located on Sullivan’s Island, the tony beach across the harbor from downtown Charleston that once served as the major entrepôt for slaves

¹⁷⁸ Powers, phone interview by Roberts and Kytte.

¹⁷⁹ Darby, phone interview by Roberts and Kytte.

¹⁸⁰ Theodore Rosengarten, phone interview by Roberts and Kytte, January 15, 2010.

to North America.¹⁸¹ Installed by the Toni Morrison Society and the National Park Service, the bench graces a serene spot in the Fort Moultrie National Monument, affording visitors the chance to sit and contemplate what it meant to be a slave. More than twenty years ago, writer Toni Morrison made an eloquent plea for just this sort of monument to the experiences of the enslaved. "There is no place you or I can go, to think . . . about [slavery]," explained Morrison. "There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath There's no small bench by the road."¹⁸² Now there is—in Charleston, no less.

Yet the remote location and the genial reception of A Bench by the Road are suggestive in their own way. A Bench by the Road, like the Holocaust Memorial, was installed without any significant public opposition. Perhaps this reflected increasing public awareness of the tragedy of the transatlantic slave trade, or the star power of Toni Morrison. It also may have been the result of the depersonalized nature of the memorial. Dedicated to "the enslaved Africans who perished during the Middle Passage and those who arrived on Sullivan's Island," the bench is, nonetheless, an abstract representation of the horrors of slavery and the slave trade.¹⁸³ It does not evoke slaves as individuals, much less as individuals willing to die to destroy slavery.

One cannot help but wonder, too, how much this reception had to do with where the memorial is located. Tucked away near the back of the Fort Moultrie National Monument, miles from downtown, A Bench by the Road is difficult to find, even for locals. And though Hampton Park is significantly closer to the center of Charleston, it is also outside the city's historical district. Like A Bench by the Road, the Vesey Monument, once it is completed, will stand far from the Calhoun Monument, far from the carriage tours that crisscross the city, and far from the eyes of the millions of tourists who visit each year. Calhoun's likeness—a tribute to one of slavery's most vocal champions that says nothing about slavery at all—will remain the dominant memorial in downtown Charleston. The peripheral locations of the Vesey Monument and A Bench by the Road, in sum, reflect the place of slavery in Charleston's historical imagination today. The efforts of local blacks and their allies that date back to the Civil War have, to some extent, paid off. But the city still struggles to, as Fredrika Bremer put it in 1850, "openly and honestly look the thing in the face."

¹⁸¹ Almost a decade earlier, the South Carolina legislature installed a historical marker on Sullivan's Island to recognize the role the island played in the transatlantic slave trade and the lives of countless African Americans. McMillin, *Final Victims*, 1.

¹⁸² Toni Morrison, "A Bench by the Road: Beloved," *World: Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association*, 3 (January–February 1989), 3.

¹⁸³ Plaque, A Bench by the Road, Fort Moultrie National Monument, Sullivan's Island, South Carolina.