9-28-2021

Monuments to the Enslaved

Carole Emberton
University at Buffalo College of Arts and Sciences

Blog 18. Carole Emberton: Monuments to the Enslaved

A photograph captures the moment when the statue on top of The Confederate Monument to General Robert E. Lee was removed from its perch on May 17, 2017. Image courtesy of CC-BY-SA-4.0*Download jpg*

Blog Author: Carole Emberton, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of History

Introduction: In the wake of George Floyd's murder in May 2020, a grassroots movement to remove, and in some cases reimagine, Confederate monuments has refocused national conversations about racial justice, memory, and public space. While some have lamented these removals as an effort to "erase history," others point out that these edifices represented only a mythologized past that itself erased the experiences of enslaved people and their descendants.

Monuments to the Enslaved

Blog Author: Carole Emberton, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of History

Keywords: African-American History; Conflict and Post-Conflict Studies; Culture and Society; Human Rights, Civil Rights; Social Justice and Social Change; Modern Architecture; Politics; Race, Law, and Policy

In the wake of George Floyd's murder in May 2020, a grassroots movement to remove, and in some cases reimagine, Confederate monuments has refocused national conversations about racial justice, memory, and public space. While some have lamented these removals as an effort to "erase history," others point out that these edifices represented only a mythologized past that itself erased the experiences of enslaved people and their descendants.

While sites like Whitney Plantation in Louisiana have centered the enslaved experience, monuments that memorialize slavery and enslaved people are not nearly as numerous as those that commemorate white slaveholders. However, there is a cache of historical documents that acts as a memorial to slavery that was in part created by the enslaved themselves.

In my forthcoming book, *To Walk About in Freedom: The Long Emancipation of Priscilla Joyner*, I use the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) Ex-Slave Narratives to explore the lived experiences of the charter generation of freedom — the men and women who were born into slavery but who came of age during and after the Civil War. As part of the New Deal in the 1930s, the FWP conducted over 2,000 interviews with formerly enslaved people, who were then in their 70s, 80s, and 90s. Many had been children during the war, but they recalled not only their own memories of slavery and freedom but also stories handed down to them by parents and grandparents. These interviews represent one of the largest and perhaps only federally-funded public history projects in the United States.

Previous histories of emancipation in the United States have focused on freedpeople's efforts to obtain economic justice as well as civil and political rights. But the emancipation stories I feature in *To Walk About in Freedom* reveal more intimate struggles. Priscilla Joyner, whose emancipation story anchors the book, searched her entire life for the truth about her parentage. Raised by a white slaveholding woman who claimed to be her mother, Priscilla grew up isolated from other Black people and tormented by the white woman's husband and other white children. It was only after she went to live with "her people," a community of freedpeople in a neighboring county, did she finally begin to understand the meaning of freedom.

Priscilla's struggles to find love and belonging are echoed throughout the FWP interviews. They evoke the emotional history of freedom, a subject that is sometimes obscured in other historical sources. But those needs are the center of all movements for social justice, including our current ones. The presence of Confederate statues have long signaled to Black people that they do not belong, that they are not welcome, that they are not part of the larger social fabric of a particular community. Our efforts to remove those monuments are based in the hope that other barriers to full inclusion and participation will come down as well.