

# *Report of Commission on Memorials*

**BROWN UNIVERSITY**

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## *Introduction*

In 2003, Brown University President Ruth J. Simmons appointed a broad-based committee of faculty, administrators, and undergraduate and graduate students to investigate the University's history with regard to slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. The Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice devoted three years to uncovering, discussing, and understanding that history, as well as to the "complex historical, political, legal, and moral questions posed by any present-day confrontation with past injustice."<sup>1</sup> In October 2006, the Steering Committee issued its final report. Among the recommendations was that the University memorialize the history revealed by the Committee by creating a "living site of memory, inviting reflection and fresh discovery without provoking paralysis or shame."<sup>2</sup> The University issued an official response to the report of the Steering Committee that the Brown Corporation endorsed in February 2007. The response includes a "Plan of Action" that, among other things, calls for the formation of a commission representing the city, state, and the University to "determine how this history should be memorialized in the state, city, and on College Hill."<sup>3</sup> The Commission met throughout the 2007–2008 academic year. This report details its process and offers recommendations for next steps.

## Summary of the Report of the Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice

The nation has been engaged in an ongoing debate about the legacy of slavery for many decades. In recent years, these debates have often centered on whether African Americans are owed some form of monetary payment for centuries of unpaid labor performed while being legally held in bondage. The argument is often extended to the disadvantages resulting from years of legalized segregation that functioned to restrict opportunities for advancement by blacks in almost every area of American life. Some legal arguments in support of reparations linked the contemporary wealth of some endowments to the participation of early benefactors of universities in the slavery enterprise. Brown University was one of the institutions named in these charges.

In response to questions about Brown's historic ties to slavery, President Simmons appointed a committee to devise a process to explore the role of Brown University in the transatlantic slave trade. She asked the committee to examine the University's historical links to slavery and to reflect on the meaning of this history in the context of current political, economic, and social questions. The committee was to do its work by provoking intellectually rigorous discussions and providing facts that might serve to enrich public dialogue about these issues.

The committee approached this charge by organizing a series of lectures, conferences, workshops, and courses designed to help the Brown community think deeply and seriously about slavery beyond questions of reparations. The committee focused on learning the historical facts about the transatlantic slave trade and how these facts compared with similar enterprises throughout history. The committee also spent some time exploring the contemporary manifestations of this past among the descendants of the trade and society more generally. Finally, they studied the manner in which other societies and institutions have grappled with various legacies of historical injustice.

The committee concluded from its research that the slavery enterprise was pervasive. It affected every area of American life and as such implicated all who were involved, whether consciously or unconsciously. The committee also learned that the legacy of the trade had long-lasting effects on American society. They discovered that when these issues were placed in a larger context, profound healing could emerge as societies confront legacies of injustice. Understanding, the committee determined, can help to repair the legacy of slavery.

The committee offered several recommendations as to how Brown might address concern about the way it benefited from the wealth amassed by slave traders. The recommendations included ideas from augmenting the curriculum at Brown to making a strong commitment to use some of the University's resources in the service of the children of Providence.

## Establishing the Commission

President Simmons embraced many of the recommendations made in the final report and offered several others. Of particular interest to the present report is the acceptance of the committee's recommendation to explore methods to memorialize the history of Rhode Island's involvement in the slave trade. President Simmons established a 10-member commission composed of members of the Brown community as well as individuals nominated by the governor of Rhode Island and the mayor of Providence. Commission members include historians; individuals with expertise in memorialization, public art, the history of slavery, and the African-American experience in Providence and Rhode Island; and those with an understanding of community and government affairs. (See appendix for list of members.) The Commission was charged with recommending "possible monuments, sites, and ceremonies in keeping with the recommendation of the Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice."<sup>4</sup>

## Process of Deliberation

The Commission met on six occasions as a group over the course of one year. Early in the process, Commission members indicated that given the complexity of the task, the process of their work would likely be long and involved. Members expressed a desire to understand the intent of the Steering Committee and to look to and learn from similar undertakings that have been established across the country and around the world aimed at shedding light on human atrocities in history. They also discussed the need to include a public dimension at some point in the planning process.

The chair of the Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, Professor James Campbell, met with the Commission to discuss the findings of the Steering Committee and to share perspectives on the Commission's charge. The Commission then turned its attention to studying various samples of memorials, museums, and commemorations. These activities included presentations by experts as well as group visits to a few sites.

The memorials presented for the Commission's discussions were:

- 1. Civil Rights Memorial**, designed by Maya Lin and located at the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, honors those who died during the civil rights movement and serves as a vehicle for education and reflection about the struggles for equality.
- 2. African Burial Ground Memorial** located in New York City honors the memories of the estimated 15,000 Africans buried at the approximately seven-acre site. From the 1690s until the 1790s, both free and enslaved Africans were buried in a 6.6-acre burial ground in Lower Manhattan outside the boundaries of the settlement of New Amsterdam, later known as New York. Lost to history due to landfill and development, the grounds were rediscovered in 1991 as a consequence of the planned construction of a federal office building.
- 3. Lancaster Slavery Memorial**, located in Lancaster, UK, focuses on Lancaster merchants who between 1750 and 1790 were responsible for the forced transportation of approximately 24,950 Africans across the Atlantic and their sale into slavery in the West Indies and the southern states of America.
- 4. Abolition Memorial** under construction in Nantes, France, is designed to deal with memory and the act of witnessing. The site, a quay on the Loire used before the end of the slave trade in France, stands as one of the few remaining witnesses to the atrocities of the French slave trade. The project exposes the remaining underground structure of the quay by means of a series of large glass panels cutting through the ground plane. The hidden structure of the quay from the 19th century is being excavated, opening and exposing an underground passage to both the river and the sky.

5. **International Slavery Museum** located in Liverpool, England, was created to promote the understanding of transatlantic slavery and its lasting impact. The museum focuses on addressing ignorance and misunderstanding of the trade by looking at the deep and permanent impact of slavery and the slave trade on Africa, South America, the USA, the Caribbean, and Western Europe.
6. **The Bristol Empire and Commonwealth Museum** in Bristol, UK, commemorated the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act throughout 2007. The museum held more than 200 related events at venues all over the city. The museum launched a major slave trade exhibition, *Breaking the Chains*, that tells the story of Britain's involvement in the slave trade using artifacts, film, and testimony.

Members also visited area sites that address difficult periods in history. They traveled to the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center and the Mystic Seaport Museum to explore the history of Native American slavery in the region and the maritime heritage of African Americans, and to consider different ways that race and slavery are represented for the public.

Additionally, several members of the Commission undertook independent research and presented their findings to the Commission for review and discussion. These included thinking about the role of public memorials; the steps needed to ensure that the project would involve the city and the state, and not be viewed as solely an initiative of Brown University; and the requirements of being considered for National Park Service status and funding. One member traveled to Sullivan Island in South Carolina to visit the first installation in the Bench by the Road project created by the Toni Morrison Society as a place where individuals can sit and reflect on the history of slavery and other forgotten memories of African American history.

## Discussion

The Commission's research revealed the diversity of approaches to memorialization, and the variety of ways in which memorials can provide meaningful opportunities to educate and shed light on a history of past human rights violations and its modern implications. In the most successful memorials, the mission and purpose of the memorial is well explicated and addresses a specific set of goals. These insights led the Commission to focus on defining a mission and purpose for the project(s).

The Commission agreed that any memorial should be designed to inform people about this history and to engage the broader public in an ongoing discussion of its meaning. The Commission considered how painful points in history can bring lasting injury and shame, and, as a result, an inclination to bury memories of those periods. Alternatively, the project could provide an opportunity to demonstrate that acknowledgement of history can lead to important lessons and opportunities for healing. The Commission agreed that this project should not be about resurrecting shame or pain but rather opening up access to reconciliation. The Commission also noted that in

pursuing the acknowledgment of this unique history, the State of Rhode Island has an opportunity to offer a destination of interest for people around the world.

Commission members agreed on several points of importance to the mission and purpose of commemoration projects. These include:

- Capturing the full extent of the history and the present-day implications of that history
- Addressing the lingering effects of slavery that manifest themselves in disparate social and economic conditions
- Reflecting the pervasiveness of the trade and its enduring impact
- Engaging ongoing debate and deliberation about human atrocities
- Helping people understand where they “fit” in this legacy
- Opening people’s minds to the importance of confronting difficult questions
- Portraying this history as an American issue, challenge, and opportunity
- Addressing the ubiquitous nature of such trauma and the need to learn how to recover from such events
- Connecting to newer groups of immigrants coming into the country
- Capturing individual stories connected to the legacy of slavery

In addition to mission and purpose, the Commission grappled with how to locate a memorial. One member noted that as the Slavery and Justice Committee report says, “Few if any institutions in our society are as quick to erect memorials as universities.” Indeed, Brown has hundreds of markers to note an enormous range of events and commemorations. The area around Brown is also remarkably rich in memorials. Almost every historic house is marked. The National Park Service memorializes Roger Williams with a center and a sculpture, and it has included the East Side and the Providence River in the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor. Historic East Side houses open to the public include the John Brown House, run by the Rhode Island Historical Society; the Stephen Hopkins House, operated by the Colonial Dames; and Lippitt House, run by Preserve RI. Along the river are memorials noting World Wars I and II, the Irish Famine, and others. More are planned.

While the landscapes of the East Side and the Providence River have changed enormously over the past 200 years, significant features remain from slave times. In addition to Brown’s early buildings and many 18th-century homes, these include several public buildings: the Old State House (1762), the Brick School House (1767), the Market House (1773), and the First Baptist Meeting House (1775). A few mercantile offices from which slave voyages were dispatched remain. And, of course, there is the river itself, uncovered in recent years, that was once lined with ships, some of them bound from or to Africa or the West Indies for commerce connected to slavery.

It may be appropriate, in memorializing Rhode Island’s role in the trade, to look beyond Brown’s immediate neighborhood. Rhode Island preserves many physical remains of the era of slavery. Bristol and Newport’s preserved waterfronts, houses, offices, and warehouses played a significant part in the slave trade. The Negro Burying Ground in Newport is perhaps the clearest reminder of

the slaves who lived in the state. The Commission concluded that these physical remains of slavery, the slave trade, and the profits of the slave trade may be useful as the state considers a memorial to the role of slavery in Providence and Rhode Island.

The Commission agreed that should we decide that a physical memorial is appropriate, it will be important to consider its place in both the historical and memorial landscape of the city. The project would need to be sensitive to the existing structures and perhaps provide a contrast to them. The members concluded that this challenge should be considered carefully as a mission statement for the memorial and a charge for potential artists to consider.

A final point pondered by the Commission was the unique opportunities and obligations of the city and state to a project commemorating the role of Rhode Island in the transatlantic slave trade. Members agreed that just as the University has challenged itself regarding the impact of slavery on its institution, the city and state should engage in efforts that would serve as the basis for connecting residents to these questions. The memorialization project offers a vehicle for the city and state to engage in a thoughtful analysis of the cultural and economic impact of slavery in Rhode Island.

The commissioners offered several points that will need to be considered as the project moves forward. For one, the state and the city should view this project as a true partnership with Brown University, given the significant history of slavery in Rhode Island and America. The governor and the mayor should provide the initial leadership, and the Rhode Island congressional delegation, state, and city political leadership should be involved in understanding the significance of this project. This step will require identifying the appropriate legislative committees and commissions (city and state) to be charged with researching slavery's impact and providing recommendations related to the Brown initiative. The members also expressed the need to identify state-, city-, and town- owned land (Providence, Newport, and Bristol) that might offer a site(s) for the project. It was also suggested that appropriate state agencies, such as Rhode Island State Council of the Arts, the state Department of Education, the Rhode Island Tourism Division, the state colleges and universities, and the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns be engaged in these discussions. Also significant to include in next-step discussions would be appropriate city agencies such as the Providence School Department, Providence Recreation Department, and Providence City Council, as well as relevant community-based organizations, including but not limited to the Rhode Island Ministerial Alliance, the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, the Providence Black Repertory Company, the Rhode Island Foundation's Black Philanthropy Initiative, the Rhode Island State Council of Churches, the NAACP, the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities, and the Urban League.

In all of these discussions, members agreed that the theme of the project should be uplifting with an emphasis on the ways in which descendants of the slave trade have continued to build the state and country.

## Recommendations

The Commission recommends:

1. That the Public Arts Committee of the University be asked to commission a memorial that recognizes the University's ties to slave trading, and, as part of the process, the Committee should engage with the wider campus and Rhode Island communities;
2. that the Commission requests a meeting with the governor and mayor to urge that they lead a process to explore how the city and state will respond to this report;
3. that the director of the Center for Slavery and Justice, when appointed, undertake a discussion of how this history should be represented in the Brown curriculum and how this curriculum can be used to further teaching at the K-12 level;
4. that the University, through the Center, provide funds for ongoing public events, seminars, and lectures on issues that help the community reflect on the history of slavery in Rhode Island and on the importance of similar atrocities around the world;
5. that a prize be created to recognize research on this subject; and
6. that this project informs how the University should address the need to memorialize Native American heritage at Brown and in this region. The Haffenreffer property in Bristol in particular may provide important opportunities in this regard.

### **APPENDIX: COMMISSION MEMBERS**

**Kerry Coppin** is associate professor of art at Brown University. He received his BFA in photographic illustration from the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1975 and his MFA in photography from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1977. Prior to joining Brown's faculty in 2005, he taught at the University of Miami, Kansas State University, and the Rochester Institute of Technology. He has received numerous awards over the years, including the Certificate of Excellence for outstanding work submitted to En Foco's New Works Photography Awards in 2004. He is currently the photography curator/advisor at the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society in Providence.

**Spencer Crew**, a 1971 alumnus of Brown, is the Clarence J. Robinson Professor of American, African American, and Public History at George Mason University. Prior to his current position, Crew served for six years as the director of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. After completing his Ph.D. at Rutgers University in 1979, Crew taught at the University of Maryland–Baltimore County. In 1981 he began his work at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History (NMAH), where after five years he became curator of his first exhibition, *Field to Factory: African-American Migration, 1915–1940*. Originally scheduled to be a temporary exhibit at NMAH, it has now become permanent. In 1994, Crew became the



first African American appointed director of the NMAH, where he and his fellow museum staff reached an audience of more than 5 million visitors a year. Crew is a member of the Brown University Board of Trustees.

**Rabbi Leslie Y. Gutterman** has served Temple-Beth-El in Providence since 1970, when he received his ordination from Hebrew Union College. A 1964 graduate of the University of Michigan, Gutterman has been involved in a variety of civic organizations and has served on several boards of trustees, including those of Butler Hospital, Rhode Island Telecommunications Commission, the Providence Athenaeum, Hospice Care, Rhode Island Kids Count, Trinity Repertory Theatre, Interfaith Health Care Ministries, the Brown University Board of Religious Overseers, and Bryant University. He is a past president of both the Jewish Family Service and the Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities. For 20 years Gutterman wrote a column for the Face of Religion page of *The Providence Journal*, and he received the public service award from the city of Providence on its 350th anniversary. Gutterman was awarded a Doctor of Divinity from Hebrew Union College and holds honorary degrees from the University of Rhode Island, Roger Williams University, Providence College, and Johnson and Wales University.

**Steven Lubar** is a professor of American civilization at Brown University and director of the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage. Prior to joining Brown in 2004, Lubar was chair of the Division of the History of Technology at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. His books include *Legacies: Collecting America's History at the Smithsonian*, *InfoCulture*, and *History from Things*. His exhibits include *America on the Move* and *Engines of Change* at the Smithsonian. His interests include the history of museums and memorials, material culture studies, and cultural theory in the study of history of technology. Lubar directs Brown University's new Public Humanities Program, building on his interests in issues of culture, community, and public history. Present research projects include work in the history of museums, material culture, and 19th-century invention and technology.

**Dietrich Neumann** was trained as an architect in Munich and in London at the Architectural Association, received his Ph.D. in architectural history from the University of Munich, and came to Brown University in 1989. His publications include a 1995 book on the German skyscraper movement; *Film Architecture: Set Design from Metropolis to Blade Runner*, which served as the catalog to an international traveling exhibition of the same name; *Architecture of the Night: The Illuminated Building*, which traces the history of architectural illumination and served as the basis for a major exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart; and frequent essays on European and American architecture of the early 20th century. Neumann's numerous honors include those of the Society of Architectural Historians; the International Association of Art Critics, Boston; and the Society of Architectural Historians in Chicago. Neumann was named Rhode Island Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation in 1995 and won teaching awards at Brown in 1993, 1994, and 1999.

**Deborah Smith** is director of municipal and external affairs in the Office of the Governor of Rhode Island and serves as an advisor in Governor Donald Carcieri's administration. Her extensive background in community leadership positions throughout the State of Rhode Island include her position as a senior vice president in the Corporate Services Group of Old Stone Bank in Providence. She was appointed by former Governor Bruce Sundlun to the Board of Governors for Higher Education, the Rhode Island Human Services Investment Council, Rhode Island Partnership for Science and Technology, the Rhode Island Commission on Criminal Justice, and the Commission on Judicial Tenure and Discipline. Bishops Gelineau and Mulvee appointed Smith to the Stewardship and Development Advisory Board for the Diocese of Providence. Smith is a graduate and past director of Leadership Rhode Island and a past president of the Urban League of Rhode Island. She is the recipient of honorary doctorates from the University of Rhode Island and the New England Institute of Technology.

**Kerry Smith** is an associate professor of history and chair of East Asian Studies at Brown University. He received his B.A. in East Asian studies and his Ph.D. in history and East Asian languages from Harvard in 1985 and 1994, respectively. He is the author of *A Time of Crisis: Japan, the Great Depression, and Rural Revitalization* (Harvard University Press), a number of shorter works on the social history of interwar Japan, and a prize-winning article on Japan's first "official" museum of the war years. Smith has received numerous honors, including an IIE Fulbright Graduate Research Fellowship in 1990, a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship in 1991, the NEH Fellowship for College Teachers and Independent Scholars in 1998, and the G. Wesley Johnson Prize from the National Council on Public History in 2003. Smith has served on numerous committees at Brown University, including the Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, and is a faculty teaching fellow at the Sheridan Center.

**Joaquina Bela Teixeira** served as executive director of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society from 1999 to 2007. She received a BFA in graphic arts, art history, and African-American studies/anthropology from Rhode Island College. Teixeira's expertise is in local black history, arts and culture, and historical heritage conservation. She specializes in interpretation in exhibition programs for academic and non-academic communities; historic sites, arts and cultural, and history programs in Rhode Island; and implementing community heritage outreach. Prior to serving as executive director of the Black Heritage Society, Teixeira was its interim director and education and outreach coordinator, manager and exhibition curator at the Providence Bookstore Café, a freelance artist, and art director at J&R Publishing. Her numerous projects with Rhode Island educational, cultural, and historical organizations include serving on the planning committee for the exhibit *Walls of Heritage, Walls of Pride* (2006); curator and coordinator of *Annual African American Legacy: An Exposition of Art Exhibition* (2002–2005); and work on the Urban Roots Tour, which highlights African-American heritage sites and places in Providence.

**O. Rogerie Thompson**, a 1973 graduate of Brown, is an associate justice at the Rhode Island Superior Court. She earned her J.D. from the Boston University School of Law. She also holds honorary degrees from the University of Rhode Island and Bryant College. In 1997, Thompson became the first African-American woman to serve as an associate justice for the Rhode Island Superior Court. Prior to that, she served as an associate judge with the Rhode Island District Court for nine years. In addition to her work in the courts, Thompson has served and continues to serve on several committees and boards including the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, the Rhode Island Children's Crusade for Higher Education, and Dorcas Place. Thompson has been the recipient of many awards recognizing her efforts to better the community around her. She recently was honored by the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society with its William A. Heathman Award for Law and Justice and by the Providence Branch of the NAACP with the Thurgood Marshall Award.

**Michael S. Van Leesten** is president of the Van Leesten Group, LLC, and also the deputy executive director of public affairs at the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation in Mashantucket, Connecticut. Past positions include executive director of the Providence Department of Planning and Development, executive director of Opportunities Industrialization Center of Rhode Island, field supervisor at the Rhode Island Commission Against Discrimination, chairman of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, and a teacher in the Providence School Department. Van Leesten was inducted into the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame in 2001 and is currently chairman of the Providence Black Repertory Company. He also took part in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Alabama and Georgia in the 1960s. Van Leesten has received an award from the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame as well as honorary degrees from the University of Rhode Island, Roger Williams University, and Rhode Island College.

Additionally, **Brenda A. Allen**, associate provost and director of institutional diversity at Brown, **Jo-Ann Conklin**, director of the David Winton Bell Gallery at Brown, and **Marisa Quinn**, vice president for public affairs and University relations at Brown work with and serve as advisors to the 10-member Commission.

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## Endnotes

1. *Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice*, pg 5.
2. *Ibid.*, pg 91.
3. Response from Brown University, page 7.
4. Press release.