



SCOPE50 News

The Struggle Continues!
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Denmark Vesey Bicentenary

This month was the 200th anniversary of Denmark Vesey's execution and the 1822 insurrection plot. On Sunday, July 3, Charleston's newspaper, the *Post and Courier*, devoted five full pages to Denmark Vesey, beginning on the front page.



Written by Jennifer Berry Hawes, it begins, “A story has haunted Charleston for 200 years now. It may or may not, be entirely true. It is about bondage and freedom, fear and courage, and 35 Black men who gave their lives so that future generations might live free. But like most stories in Charleston's racially fraught history, White elites recorded this one, forever preserving a one-sided account of what happened during the sweltering summer of 1822. We know this story by the name of one man: Denmark Vesey. He was executed on July 2, 1822 – two days before the nation celebrated its freedom – for the charge of ‘attempting to raise an insurrection among the blacks against the whites.’ His death made him a martyr to Black residents, a freedom fighter whose legacy inspired generations to fight for equality, no matter how grave the risks. For Whites, he loomed a would-be murderer, a terrorist intent on killing them all. The latter view is changing today, as more Charlestonians confront the city's racial history. On this bicentennial anniversary of the planned uprising, prominent groups across Charleston's racial divides are even joining forces to host events that celebrate Vesey.” The Denmark Vesey Bicentenary event was held July 14-16, and included panel discussions, concerts, and storytelling sessions for children to pass on the remarkable story of Denmark Vesey.

Some facts about Denmark Vesey: He was born enslaved in 1767 in St. Thomas, where he was purchased by slave trader Joseph Vesey and relocated to Charleston in 1783. He remained enslaved until 1799 when he purchased his freedom with money from a winning lottery ticket. He worked as a carpenter but was unable to secure the freedom of his family, which was a continuing frustration for him.

He became active in Charleston's African Church when it was formed in 1818. But because the AME Church was an abolitionist denomination, white citizens and officials harassed the church's members and leaders, further radicalizing Vesey.

Vesey and a group of skilled, privileged slaves began to organize rural and city slaves in a plan to overpower the municipal guard, arm themselves, set fires and escape to Haiti, which was revered as the only place where enslaved people had overthrown their colonial masters and created an independent nation. Haiti offered legal protection to blacks who reached its shores. However, their plans were betrayed, and Denmark Vesey and 34 others were executed. Municipal authorities also destroyed the African Church.

The program for the Denmark Vesey Bicentenary events contains an article by Dr. Bernard E. Powers, Founding Director of the College of Charleston's Center for the Study of Slavery in Charleston. He writes that "Denmark Vesey's impact survived his demise in part because white South Carolinians never recovered from his dreadful plans." The developments that followed "propelled the state into secession and war to protect white lives, to escape Denmark Vesey's shadow; it failed and almost destroyed the nation. Today's persistent racial ills two centuries after Denmark Vesey's life reveal how limited his options were and the potent legacy of slavery. Vesey's shadow persists and demands we confront that legacy or risk the health and stature of the nation."

Update on Gun Control

Since our last Newsletter, President Biden has signed into law a bipartisan gun bill, ending nearly three decades of gridlock in Washington over how to address gun violence in the United States. The bill embodies incremental but impactful movement, but falls short of the more restrictive gun control proposals that Democrats favor. The bill toughens background checks for the youngest gun buyers, keeps firearms from more domestic violence offenders and helps states put in place red flag laws that make it easier for authorities to take weapons from people adjudged dangerous. It also funds local programs for school safety, mental health and violence prevention.

But at the same time, the Supreme Court ruled that Americans have a right to carry firearms in public for self-defense, a ruling likely to lead to more people being legally armed. The decision struck down a New York law requiring people to demonstrate a particular need for carrying a gun in order to get a license to carry a gun in a concealed way in public. The justices said that requirement violates the Second Amendment right to "keep and bear arms."

Presidential Medal of Freedom Recipients

Among the Presidential Medal of Freedom honorees this month were several Civil Rights icons:

Diane Nash – a founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee who organized some of the most important civil rights campaigns of the 20th century. Nash worked closely with Martin Luther King, who described her as the "driving spirit in the nonviolent assault on segregation at lunch counters."

Fred Gray – one of the first black members of the Alabama State legislature since Reconstruction. As an attorney, he represented Rosa Parks, the NAACP, and Martin Luther King, who called him "the chief counsel for the protest movement."

Sister Simone Campbell – a member of the Sisters of Social Service and former Executive Director of NETWORK, a Catholic social justice organization. She is also a prominent advocate for economic justice, immigration reform, and healthcare policy.

Raúl Yzaguirre – a civil rights advocate who served as CEO and president of National Council of La Raza for thirty years. (The National Council of La Raza rose out of the Chicano civil rights movement in the late 1960s and '70s.) He also served as U.S. Ambassador to the Dominican Republic under President Barack Obama.

Khizr Khan – a Gold Star father and founder of the Constitution Literacy and National Unity Center. He is a prominent advocate for the rule of law and religious freedom and served on the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom under President Biden.

Richard Trumka (d. 2021) – president of the 12.5-million-member AFL-CIO for more than a decade, president of the United Mine Workers, and secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO. Throughout his career, he was an outspoken advocate for social and economic justice.

Mary McLeod Bethune

Civil rights leader and trailblazing educator Mary McLeod Bethune has become the first black person elevated by a state for recognition in the U. S. Capitol's Statuary Hall. (Rosa Parks became the first Black woman to be depicted in a full-length statue in Statuary Hall, but she is not part of the National Statuary Hall Collection.) Florida commissioned the project after a grassroots campaign succeeded last year in removing a statue of Edmund Kirby Smith, among the last Confederate generals to surrender after the Civil War.



Bethune was born in South Carolina in 1875, seven years after the ratification of the 14th Amendment, with its guarantee of equal protection under the law for all in the United States. She died in 1955, having helped to lay the groundwork for the civil rights movement. Mary McLeod Bethune is perhaps most remembered for founding the school now known as Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach, Florida, which she started as a girls' school in 1904. She also was one of the founders of the United Negro College Fund, which became a financial backbone for predominantly Black higher institutions nationwide. After forming a strong friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt, Bethune became director of the Negro Affairs Division for the National Youth Administration, a New Deal-era program. Bethune led the "Black Cabinet" of President Franklin D. Roosevelt as the highest-ranking Black government official, pushing him to diversify the defense industry and later helping draft President Harry Truman's executive order desegregating the armed forces.

Reconstruction Era National Historic Network

The Reconstruction Era National Historic Network was established in March 2019 and now includes 81 sites in 27 states and the District of Columbia. The Network, which is managed by the Reconstruction Era National Historical Park (in Beaufort, SC), a project of the National Park Service, is a manifestation of an effort to highlight the short period of intense democratization that began during the Civil War and ended in 1877. The National Park Service is expanding the time frame to 1900, “by which date the grip of Jim Crow had tightened nearly to its limit.” The network is nationwide and works to provide opportunities for visitors to connect to the stories of Reconstruction.

Twenty-five of the 81 sites are in South Carolina. The Reconstruction Era National Historical Park consists of several sites in the Beaufort area, including the Penn Center, several churches, schools and the home of Robert Smalls, the most influential African American politician in South Carolina during the Reconstruction Era. Smalls is the enslaved sailor who commandeered a Confederate ship, sailed it out of Charleston Harbor past the guns of Fort Sumter, and turned it over to Union forces.

The Historical Park, and the Network, is the result of two decades of advocacy that began in 2000 when then-Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt and historian Eric Foner visited Beaufort to consider establishing a federal monument to Reconstruction. In 2015 the National Park Service began to interpret the Reconstruction period with the aim of drawing attention to a neglected but fascinating part of American history. A consensus soon emerged among elected officials, civic leaders, academics and private-sector leaders that Beaufort should become the epicenter of the new enterprise.

For a list of the sites in the network, go to <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/reconstruction/network.htm>

Andersonville Prison by John Reynolds

About thirty miles south of Fort Valley, Georgia, is the Confederate prison-of-war camp in Andersonville. After leaving the HBCU-Civil Rights tour group in Fort Valley (see the following article by Sherie Labedis), my wife Gloria and I decided to visit Andersonville because Gloria’s great-grandfather, Isaiah Richardson, had been a prisoner-of-war there. Isaiah, who served with the 1st Maine Cavalry, fortunately survived his imprisonment. We found his name in the database at the Museum. Andersonville was the largest and most infamous of the Civil War prisons. It was in operation from February 1864 until the end of the war. During that time approximately 45,000 Union soldiers were held in captivity there; of these, nearly 13,000 died, making Andersonville the deadliest landscape of the Civil War.



Photo by AJ Riddle, August 1864

Today, the Andersonville National Historic Site comprises three distinct components: the former site of the prison, the Andersonville National Cemetery, and the National Prisoner of War Museum, which opened in 1998 to honor all U.S. prisoners-of-war in all wars.

The prison site covers 26½ acres and was enclosed by a 15-foot high stockade wall. The prison was designed to house 10,000, but at its most crowded, it held more than 32,000 men, many of them wounded and starving, in horrific conditions with rampant disease, contaminated water, and only minimal shelter (makeshift tents) from the blazing sun and the chilling winter rain. Due to the terrible conditions, prisoners suffered greatly and a high mortality rate ensued. When the war ended, Captain Henry Wirz, the stockade commander, was arrested and charged with "murder, in violation of the laws of war." Tried and found guilty by a military tribunal, Wirz was hanged in Washington, DC on November 10, 1865.

The best source of information on African Americans at Andersonville is testimony given at the Wirz trial. Before the war ended, approximately 180,000 African Americans from the north and the south enrolled in the U.S. military. The most well-known of the "Colored Regiments" was the 54th Massachusetts Infantry; the 1989 movie, *Glory*, told the story of the 54th Massachusetts regiment from its formation until its unsuccessful storming of Fort Wagner in Charleston Harbor. The number of African Americans at Andersonville in the prisoner database is 106; the number of deaths is listed as 33. This death rate of 31% is very close to the overall death rate of 29%. According to the witnesses at the Wirz trial, black prisoners were used on work details outside the stockade: pulling stumps, cutting wood, digging ditches. The black prisoners stayed together in a section of the prison. Some white prisoners were angry with the black prisoners because of the breakdown of the exchange agreement. At the beginning of the war, Union and Confederate soldiers were exchanged on a one-to-one basis. But when the Confederate army refused to exchange black prisoners, insisting that they should be treated as runaway slaves and returned to their owners, the exchange process ended. This in fact was the reason that the Andersonville prison was built. The Confederacy was forced to move the multitude of Union prisoners it was holding in Richmond, VA, farther away from the battlefield. After examining several sites in South Georgia, The Confederate military chose a suitable spot in Andersonville.

In June 1864 one of the prisoners, 19-year old Dorence Atwater, 2nd New York Cavalry, was assigned to work in the hospital where he recorded the names and grave locations of the deceased. He secretly copied this list and smuggled it out when he was released. After the war, he met with Clara Barton, a battlefield nurse, who was looking for missing soldiers on behalf of their families. Atwater, Barton and the US Army Quartermaster went to Andersonville to mark the graves of the dead. Atwater's list enabled many families to locate their loved ones. Thanks to his work, over 95 percent of the graves were identified.

The cemetery site was established as Andersonville National Cemetery on July 26, 1865. By 1868, the cemetery held the remains of more than 13,800 Union soldiers whose bodies had been retrieved after their deaths in hospitals, battles, or prison camps throughout the region. Andersonville National Cemetery has been used continuously since its founding and currently averages over 150 burials of military veterans a year. The cemetery and associated prison site became a unit of the National Park System in 1970.

Opened in 1998, the museum honors not only the Andersonville prisoners, but is dedicated to American soldiers who suffered captivity in all wars. Former prisoners of war partnered with Andersonville National Historic Site to create and develop the National Prisoner of War Museum, the only museum solely dedicated to interpreting the American prisoner of war experience.

Two films are shown throughout the day. One focuses on the history of the Andersonville Prison and the other on the experience of American prisoners of war. The first exhibit gallery answers the question "What is a POW?" This is followed by exhibit areas exploring the themes of *capture, living conditions, news and communications, those who wait, privation, morale and relationships, and escape and freedom*. Throughout the exhibits there are touchable items and exhibit drawers that may be opened to find out more about prisoners of war.

Once filled with desolation, despair, and death, Andersonville now offers a place for remembrance and reflection. Touring the prison site, the cemetery, and the museum, we remember POWs and honor their courage, service, and sacrifice.

If you checked the link for the Reconstruction Era National Historic Network, you will note that one of the sites in Georgia is the Andersonville National Historic Site. In 1865, formerly enslaved people moved into the old stockade at Andersonville. The American Missionary Association operated a Freedman's school in the prison hospital, and formerly enslaved people organized Emancipation Day services in 1869 in the cemetery. Shortly afterwards, the Ku Klux Klan attacked the freedman community and by the end of Reconstruction, the black community had been driven away by Jim Crow policies.

HBCU-Civil Rights Tour by Sherie Labedis

The World Is a Book, And Those Who Do Not Travel Read Only a Page

How can you touch a life and make a permanent difference? Heritage Empowered Tours does just that with their HBCU-Civil Rights tour. The purpose of each tour is to provide an opportunity for students to sample HBCUs and to experience the Civil Rights Movement through museums and historical sites, by meeting veterans and through discussions. I have had the good fortune to have been on four of these tours, so I guess you can call me a believer. This tour was July 10 to 15.

So, what is the HBCU component of the tour? There are 101 HBCUs. Thirty-nine of these schools have a transfer agreement that guarantees admission to California Community College students. At the schools we visited, students toured the facility and met with recruiters who explained what the school has to offer and how much it costs to transfer and live there. Each of the schools offered the following:

- They promise a family atmosphere and the individual attention a student might need to be successful.
- They provide scholarships so students end up paying little if anything to attend. If from California, the school waives out of state tuition.
- They provide students something they can't get anywhere else but an HBCU — a diverse and inclusive community of scholarship that celebrates the richness of the entire American experience, with a focus on black history and culture.

The schools that took part on this trip were Fort Valley University (FVSU – They had the best goodie bags), Alabama State University, Tuskegee University (in a downpour), Clark Atlanta University, Spelman College (only a drive by as they were closed for the summer), Morehouse College (Our women were not allowed on the tour as it is a men’s school.), Morris Brown College (drive-by), Stillman College, and Talladega College (second best goodie bags).

Who were our students? The majority were community college students who have the credits to transfer or who are looking for a campus in the future. We had one elementary student, one junior high school student, and three high school students. Ages ranged from eleven to over forty (one old enough to have fathered ten children, one of whom accompanied him). Five students were from the San Francisco Bay Area, but seventeen were from Antelope Valley College in northern Los Angeles County where they were participants in AVC’s Student Equity Program. Those students who were eligible to transfer now brought their transcripts. It’s a good thing some of them did.

The individualized attention was obvious from the beginning. I’ll choose students who had particularly exciting options.

- At Stillman, George who loves all things musical, let the school tour guide know. The guide contacted the head of the music department who was unable to join us but suggested that George at least see the band facilities without the rest of the crowd on the bus so that George could get specific answers to his questions from a band student.



- At Fort Valley Alex missed part of the group tour. He mentioned that he loved football and a gentleman came to take him to see the football facilities. The head coach met with him, discussed his financial issues offering him scholarships, took his transcript and sent him home with an application he was to send back immediately so that he could enroll this Fall.

- Hollis was taken with Morehouse. He is from the Caribbean, and he goes home summers traveling from California. Morehouse is hours closer and has a list of famous alumni including Martin Luther King, Jr. who gave his first sermon in this chapel. Male students met the president of the college.



- Talladega offered something that surprised us all. Many international students come there. The majority are athletes and the majority of those come from Spanish speaking companies. Two of the girls on the bus were Hispanic. At Talladega Irene found that she could get a job going to classes with students so she could translate for them.



- Alabama rolled out the red carpet for Tom who found his baseball interests leading to a meeting with the head coach.



What was the civil rights component?

The Civil Rights Movement changed the United States in term of politics, social and economic relationships for people of color. It is a crime to me (but no surprise) that in the last thirty years the systematic inequalities and race have been turning the tide backward, especially since Trump. In 1965 we faced danger and some of us were attacked. We accepted that it was just that we were in the South. Since Trump, the danger has exploded, and it is a nationwide phenomenon applying to anyone who disagrees with the MAGA world.

Born less than thirty years ago, most of the students with us had no visceral sense of what life was like before the Movement even though they had seen and heard about it in classes. Many had asked family members what “that” life was like only to be put off or told it was disturbing to talk about. The purpose of this part of the trip was to enable them to see, hear and feel what it took to bring about the civil rights they enjoy today and to appreciate how they must fight to retain and expand these rights.

Our first civil rights activity (at Fort Valley University) opened their minds to what people who were involved with the struggle could teach them. Those people were Barbara Emerson, John Reynolds and me. (Too bad we couldn't have had the entire SCOPE50 Board.) We formed a panel and we each came at the struggle from a different point of view. Barbara was born into the Movement. She lived with her mother in the north and thought her dad Hosea Williams had a normal eight to five job. It wasn't until she went to live with her dad to go to college that she learned the truth. She arrived at his house with suitcases only to find out he was in jail – again. At 17 she was the CFO for SCLC. I came from a segregated world: white! I was middle class and well educated. I thought that was normal. Bloody Sunday blew away any misconceptions I might have had about what was going on in the South and I joined SCOPE. John was the closer. While Barbara and I talked about what was – and what we do now to preserve any gains we made in the 'sixties and to fight the challenges we now face, John told his story but then turned the tables on the kids. What a closer he is. What were THEY going to do, how were they going to meet the challenge before them? We must have moved them because there were lots of questions once someone asked the first one. Barbara and John were both surrounded. I answered questions, but the kids knew I would be on the bus. It was a solid beginning for what they were going to experience in the next four days.

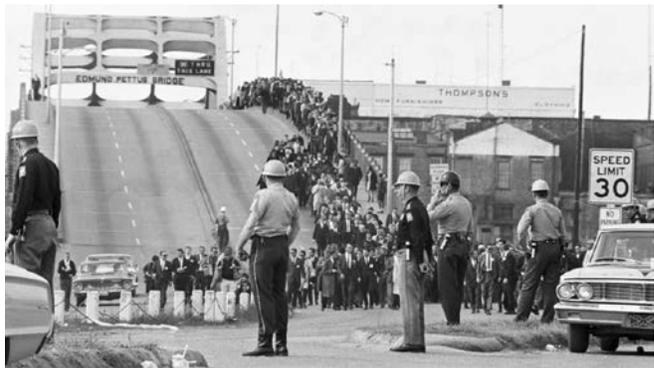
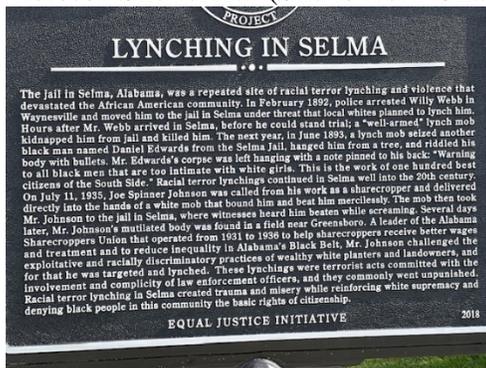




The panel with each other and Dr. Karen McCord, CEO of Heritage Empowered, Ms. Rashall Hightower and Ms. Crystal Garcia of the Equity Department of Antelope Valley College

You can read the included itinerary to see the sites we visited. Again, I will deal with student responses to particular places. We went to Selma the day after the panel. They all knew about Bloody Sunday, but as before, they didn't feel Bloody Sunday. Since we were a small group, it was easy for those who knew to teach. Some individual responses:

- We were crossing the Edmund Pettis Bridge and I had Evie stop just before she could see over the arc. I had her go over the arc imagining there was a wall of police ahead of her waiting to hurt her as much as they possibly could. I had her imagine being ridden down by horses. She felt it. (She is from Ghana.)



- Also, in Selma I was in the bathroom with Joanie. The bathroom was in a lovely old hotel. We washed and dried our hands and I reminded her that she would never have been allowed in that bathroom. In fact, someone would have dragged her out. She thought I was kidding. She was shocked when she realized I wasn't. She felt it.
- For Irene realization came at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights. Through her tears she asked me how people could be so cruel, having just watched a film on the Freedom Riders and seeing their mug shots across the wall – a lot of determined faces.
- Sonja was half black and half white. Her mother was anti-black for some reason and had raised Sonja refusing to allow her to learn about her father or her blackness. The National Memorial for Peace was more than she could take, and she just sat and cried.
- The museum has an interactive lunch counter simulation with seats and headphones. As students sat there, they heard the things that white folks said and did to those who sat in at restaurants. Those things were directed at them. Some made it through the entire couple of minutes and walked away shaken. Others left in tears early on.



- In Birmingham we visited the 16th Street Baptist Church from the outside as it was closed. Then we walked through Kelly Ingram Park where statues recount the Children’s March complete with jail cells and attacking dogs at shoulder level two on one side and one on the other snarling and jumping out. Again, tears and questions about how people can do this to one another.



Dr. King said, “No one really knows why they are alive until they know what they’d die for.” In my case and I suspect for many of you the answer was and is the right to vote for those who have been denied. Our students had not understood the importance of the history they came from or the grave challenges of our present time. These students had not been asked that question before and as they pondered it, they looked to the college or university that would make finding that answer possible. Their travel had offered them several of the pages necessary to write their futures.

Get Out the Vote Flyer

A copy of SCOPE50’s vote flyer is included again on the last page of the Newsletter.



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Register to Vote

VOTE
in the 2022 Election
November 8



Rise up and resist voter suppression