



Greater Louisville Alliance of Black School Educators

P.O. Box 37348
Louisville, KY 40232-7348

History: A Lens on Our Future

By Susan Graseck

One might argue that the historian is the conscience of the nation, if honesty and consistency are factors that nurture the conscience.

—John Hope Franklin

Slavery in the United States has traditionally been thought of (and taught) as a Southern problem. Indeed, many students, and even teachers, are unaware of the extent of slavery in the North, particularly in New England. Long thought of as the birthplace of abolitionism, New England has a more complex history of slavery and the trade in slaves than many realize.

In 2003, Ruth Simmons, president of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, established a Slavery and Justice Committee at the university to investigate and to prepare a report about the university's historical relationship to slavery and the transatlantic slave trade and to explore "the complex historical, political, legal, and moral questions posed by any present-day confrontation with past injustice." Led by Brown University Professor James Campbell, this three-year effort was far more extensive and inclusive than a mere examination of connections that the university had; it was a scholarly effort to examine the nature and extent of the slave trade and slavery in New England and an educational effort designed to help the university community, the city, the state, and the nation reflect on the meaning of this history in the present. This work was happening at a time when similar efforts were taking place in other parts of the country, the efforts of the New York Historical Society being a prime example.

In a Choices Program (a national education institute based at Brown University) Scholars Online video interview designed for use in secondary schools, Campbell—a professor of Africana studies, American civilization, and history—explained why it was critical to take on this work. "The way we tell the story of the past changes; and it changes in relationship to where we are in the present," Campbell said. "And I think nowhere is that truth more dramatic than in looking at the way the history of slavery and the slave trade has been represented."

Today, there are many resources that contribute to a change in the way the history of slavery in America is taught. That change cannot happen too soon. Generations have been raised on the Southern plantation/Northern abolitionist narrative of slavery. Our history is much more complex. The slave trade and Northern slavery are integral components of American economic and social history. Understanding the intricate nature of that history not only sets the record straight but provides a lens into our past that can help our students gain insight into similar complexity in our world today.

Too often, we take for granted that things are as they are just because ... because they are. When John Hope Franklin, renowned scholar of African-American history and civil rights activist, died in March, his statement about the role of the historian as the conscience of the nation was popping up in many newspapers. The role of a history

teacher is not dissimilar; it is our responsibility to bring our history, in all of its complexity, into the light where we can explore that history in the context in which it took place. Yet, at the same time, we must not give it a pass as something that happened and is over.

The study of history is an exploration of the long shadow cast across our present by past events. If we step back into that past and explore it as living choices faced by real people—just as we face choices today—it can give us insight, in turn, to understand that our present will someday be viewed differently. Whether the topic is immigration, race, war, or genocide, people in the future will look back on us and ask, "How could they? Why did they do what they did? Couldn't they see?" Understanding this dynamic between our past and our future gives us perspective that allows us to get engaged now and to ask, "What can I do to make this a better world today and in the future?" This is what we mean at the Choices Program when we say "Explore the past; shape the future." It should be a central component in every student's education.

James Campbell's full interview, other Scholars Online videos, and links to a range of resources from multiple sources are available online at www.choices.edu/resources/slavetrade.php.

About the author:

Susan Graseck is director of the Choices Program, a national educational initiative based at Brown University. Choices has published curriculum resources on the slave trade and slavery in the North in collaboration with Brown University's Slavery and Justice Committee.