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Locks and Cash: Whose Black History? (Part 1)

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Locks and Cash: Whose Black History? (Part 1)

Abstract

The African-American Civil War Memorial has been a favorite site of mine in DC (and not simply because it's just down the block from the District's best restaurant, Ben's Chili Bowl). It is a monument in the right setting. Instead of being on the mall with the rest of the other monuments, to be easily overlooked like the DC World War I memorial or similar sidelights to the big three of Lincoln, Washington and Vietnam, the African American Civil War Memorial is in a community that can be moved by it. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Black History

Disciplines

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Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

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THURSDAY, JUNE 23, 2011

Locks and Cash: Whose Black History? (Part 1)

I have been very excited all spring, looking forward to an event which few Civil War folks had on their calendars. I have.



The monument depicts soldiers and sailors in motion. Their energy is infectious.

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The African-American Civil War Memorial has been a favorite site of mine in DC (and not simply because it's just down the block from the District's best restaurant, [Ben's Chili Bowl](#)). It is a monument in the right setting. Instead of being on the mall with the rest of the other monuments, to be easily overlooked like the DC World War I memorial or similar sidelights to the big three of Lincoln, Washington and Vietnam, the African American Civil War Memorial is in a community that can be moved by it.

U street is a key historic community, the heart of Shaw and a community which has been historically black for over a century. Duke Ellington was born there. DC's African American populace found culture and formed community there in the early 20th century, in spite of segregation in the Nation's capitol. Where better to have a monument to honest, hard working Americans of African decent than in the heart of a community where their inspiration can reach out to a modern African-American community?

Starting this summer, the monument will be flanked by a real, professional museum to help buttress and support its interpretive mission. And that museum is opening in July of this year. And they are charging \$200 per person to be there for the ribbon cutting.

In the end this is their right. The museum appears to be a private concern. The African-American Civil War Museum can charge an exorbitant fee for participation in their opening programs. It is their prerogative.

But is it wise? Are they preserving history through these actions, or segregating that history away from those who could benefit the most from its inspiration? Whose history is "black history" anyways?

The African-American Civil War Museum seems to be declaring that history is the domain of the rich. Instead of a public focused event, they are launching the museum with a proverbial black-tie style gala ribbon cutting. The vast majority of DC's African-American population cannot afford \$200 per person to participate in the event. Screenings of *Birth of a Nation* and *Glory* will be part of the festivities, presumably with interpretive introductions discussing the value and meaning of the films. But will the eyes and ears who need to see them, who would benefit the most from being inspired by *Glory* and revolted by *Birth of a Nation*, be in the audience when tickets cost \$200 a pop? I understand the need for ticketing when seats might run low and fire codes might be broken. But is the \$200 fee blatant fund-raising, with no interpretive mission?



Could this sailor have scraped together \$11
(the 1863 equivalent value) to attend
the opening of the museum?

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DC is the land of the free museum. The Smithsonian museums are free. They collectively reach millions of eyes each year. Rich and poor alike can see the Apollo capsules, Lincoln's hat and the majestic dinosaurs. The National Archives is free. Rich and poor alike can read the promise that they, too, are heirs to the American dream of, "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The Library of Congress is free. Rich and poor alike have unfettered access to the wealth of the ages in the greatest treasury of human knowledge since Alexandria. The Bureau of Engraving and Printing, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the White House and Ford's Theatre all are free to all, regardless of how much spare change they have in their pockets.

Who cares if I, a short, fat white boy from New York, can see the African-American Civil War Museum? I can afford the price if I tried hard enough. If there is an admission fee for the museum, I'll eventually pay it. I care about black history. I see black history as my history too. But I don't need to learn those lessons which can be taught by these men who risked all for freedom. I already have.

I want to see the public history profession preaching to the congregation and not simply the choir.

I want a poor mother of a few kids barely scraping by in some obscure corner of DC to take her family to this place and draw strength from it. I want a homeless man to stumble in off the street and draw inspiration to try again at bettering his life because that's what these men did, again and again, in the face of insurmountable odds. I want a penniless college student, working minimum wage jobs to put themselves through school to think that if those men could face such cruelty and unfairness, maybe they

might be able to continue on too. I want everyone, white or black, rich or poor, young or old to have access to this story everywhere it lives in America because it's their history. Anything short and I think we've failed as a society and as public historians.

So, I won't be taking a day off for the grand opening of the museum. I'll be sitting at my desk instead, probably listening to the soundtrack of *Glory* and daydreaming about those men who inspire me everyday to keep moving forward. They'll be marching across my consciousness. I'll make it to U-Street to see the museum soon, after the expensive hullabaloo is all over. And you can bet there will be a review right here. I hope against all else it will be a positive one.

Next week, I'll try to bring this question of who should have the right to lock up history a bit closer to home. Sometimes it's not cash that stands in the way, but a simple iron gate.



CC / Kevin H.