

Reimagining History through the Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials

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An Uncommon Way of Understanding History

History is not only the study of past events. We can also think of history as a way of seeing past occurrences in the world because history happens all around us every day; we are the lives that are impacted by these snapshots in our society. This essay highlights how rhetoric was used to perpetuate a narrative that was harmful, detrimental to the lives of African Americans, and how this history is connected to the present. How we consume history matters. Most people absorb this knowledge while attending school, usually not continuing past the moment their education has concluded. However, we can often view where we are in society by connecting with our past and retracing those steps to formulate an analysis of deep understanding. Therefore, it is worthwhile to consider the possibility that history is something more than just a subject of academic study. It is an archive of our existence on this planet. With that comes a grave realization that we must be more careful when examining historical topics.



Figure F-1. “The Legacy Museum offers a powerful, immersive journey through America’s history of racial injustice and its evolution from enslavement to mass incarceration,” <https://legacysites.eji.org/about/museum/>. Photo credit, Equal Justice Initiative.

The Legacy Museum and its Historical Significance

I had the chance to witness how rhetoric and history are interconnected during my trip to the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. Initially, I had a preconception in my mind about what I was going to witness at the Peace and Justice Memorial because I heard about the site when it was first erected. However, I did not know much about the Legacy Museum. The Legacy Museum and Peace and Justice Memorial are separate sites about a twenty-minute walk from each other. Even though the two sites are separate, both sites work to display the historical lives of African Americans in the United States. The Legacy Museum prohibits photography, which I found somewhat surprising. I had thought that some objects within the museum may have been archival discoveries and considered delicate. However, the restriction of photography was more about what lay behind the doors of the past. The parts of United States History that define the African American community in this country are the Era of Institutional Slavery and The Civil Rights Movement. These two moments in United States history are pivotal in establishing what it meant to be African American in the past and what it means in the present, how African Americans have existed and persevered against many barriers in society. We must analyze these portions of history because these events set the stage for what we know now as the present operation of society within the United States. Without this history, the country would be drastically different than how we perceive it today. When it comes to race relations and understanding race from a rhetorical perspective, these two events serve as crucial checkpoints within the progression of the United States.

The Institution of Slavery

Slavery in the United States was prevalent for a large portion of the country's existence, and some would argue that some form of slavery still occurs to this day. This horrid institution spanned from the Colonial Era to the conclusion of the American Civil War with the abolishment of slavery by the Emancipation Proclamation, signed in 1863. However, the last of the country's enslaved peoples were not freed until June nineteenth, 1865, some two and a half years after Emancipation was enacted. June nineteenth is known and recognized as Juneteenth (Pruitt-Young).

During the operation of slavery, the enslaved endured roughly four hundred years of bondage. The United States had briefly used a type of bondage where indebted people were temporarily enslaved until their debt could be remedied, also known as indentured servitude. However, the country decided to adopt a harsher system of slave labor, paving the way for what we know as chattel slavery. Under this system, African slaves were not recognized as human, but as sub-human, thereby, dissolving their agency and dehumanizing them to nothing more than livestock that could be bought, sold, and shipped throughout the country. I witnessed this depiction clearly as I traversed the Legacy Museum. Statues of the enslaved showed them chained together, stumbling as they tried to trudge through the sand of an unknown land.

The location of this museum is symbolic and significant as well, due to it being on the site of a cotton warehouse that used to be in the center of Montgomery. The warehouse is where the enslaved labored, steps away from the town center, where they would be bought and sold to slaveholders and separated from their families. Plantations were not the only places enslaved Black people were being utilized. Other pillars of society like universities and government buildings incorporated slave labor for regular maintenance and construction of structures. Some universities have receipts for the purchase of slaves within their archival records.

This museum changed my perception of how slaves were documented. I was astonished by the number of personal accounts that could be referenced and cited even though most people would agree that there is not much personal or even familial information about the enslaved. When it comes to documentation during chattel slavery, historians are very likely to uncover dental records of slaves and bills of sale receipts, rather than family histories. Being considered chattel by their abductors, African slaves were stripped of their identities and the established agency they had in their homeland. Even more so, once the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was abolished, enslaved Africans in the New World were completely cut off from their ancestral lands altogether, further leading to this loss of cultural and ethnic identity. From the moment they were captured, they would work strenuously and live in subpar conditions, where punishments for disobedience or any infraction deemed as such were harsh. Even after slavery was abolished and the abrupt end of the Reconstruction Era, Black people still faced grave obstacles ahead.

The Civil Rights Movement

Some early origins of the Civil Rights Movement could be traced back to Congress enacting the Freedmen's Bureau (1865-1872). The Bureau aimed to increase the welfare of newly freed Black people and help emancipated Black people transition to society, away from enslavement, by creating opportunities for them. Some opportunities for Black people to take advantage of were supervised labor contracts, land acquisition for homesteading, education, family reunification, etc. The Bureau also provided funding for historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to operate and advance the education of Black people. However, due to the changing political environment in the country at the time and waning financial support, Congress eventually terminated the Bureau. Additionally, the social gains that Black people had were beginning to be undone once the United States government started withdrawing troops from the South and allowing succeeding states back into the Union, part of the assurance of authority for the Bureau to properly fulfill their operations. With no Bureau and less federal oversight, southern states began repressing the rights of Black people once again. There were no mainstream organizations in the country after the federally supported Freedmen's Bureau for the rest of the nineteenth century, until 1909 when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded.

Like the Freedmen's Bureau and similar groups throughout the United States, the NAACP was established to ensure the welfare, equal treatment, and justice for African Americans in the United States. Organization activity in Montgomery, Alabama, was the essential catalyst and ground zero for the organization's fight for racial equality a few decades after its founding. The Montgomery Bus Boycott was an opportunity for African Americans to be seen and heard on a national scale and not ignored and pushed to the side. Black people then felt empowered to fight for the rights granted to them by the United States Constitution and its consequential Amendments. These rights were withheld by powerful actors in state and local governments trying to continue exercising oppressive authority over Black people, like that of slaveholders from the Antebellum Era. For example, many southern states had laws, processes, and even taxes that restricted voting rights for African Americans.

The Legacy Museum had a section within their Civil Rights exhibit with sample voter registration exams distributed to Black people to complete and pass before they could register to vote. Many asked questions requiring the examinees to attempt puzzles that did not pertain to civic participation or elections, instead testing "intellectual competence." Often examinees would not pass these exams because of the obscure exam questions asked, thus denying them the ability to register to vote. I found it essential to include a sample registration exam in this essay because viewing the entire artifact completely underscores the type of obscure questions that Black people had to answer to register to vote. Besides the financial exclusion that poll taxes created, registration exams were a major obstacle to voter registration and civic participation among Black people. The Legacy Museum also has space for smaller theaters within the Civil Rights exhibit where I could see some of the groundwork for this part of the museum via videography from prevalent activists recounting their experiences in conjunction with historical footage of the Civil Rights Movement.

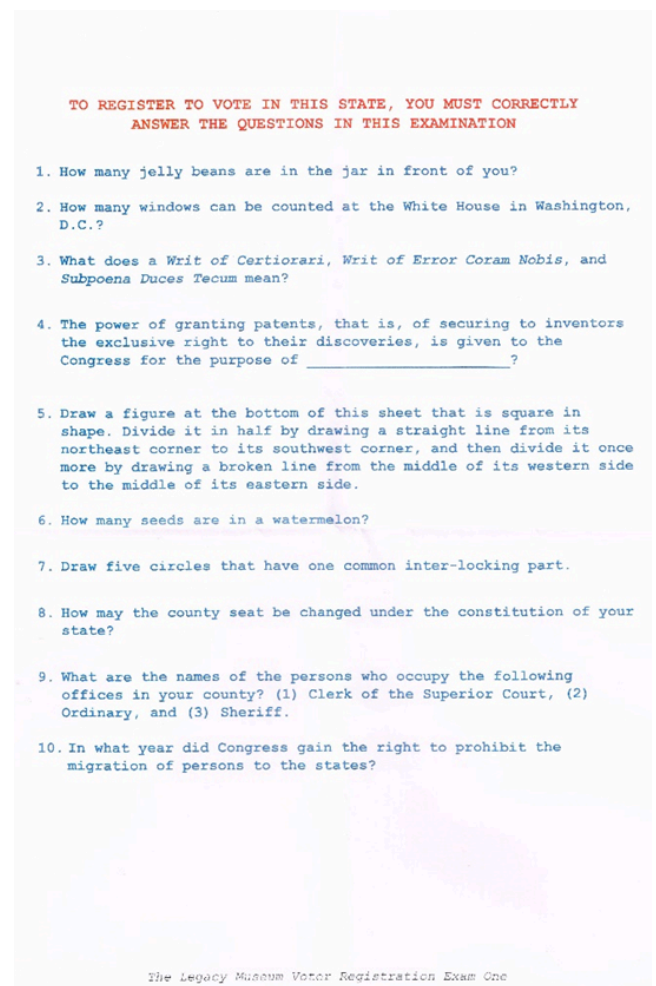


Figure F-2. Sample Registration Exam, The Legacy Museum. Credit, Equal Justice Initiative.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice and its Significance

While the Legacy Museum was an informative and interactive experience, the Peace and Justice Memorial offered a different experience. The scene at the memorial was solemn, even though it was a sunny day when I attended. Some eight hundred monuments, six feet in length, pervade the structure and site of the memorial. These steel monuments represent each county in the United States where Black people were lynched, with the names of victims engraved in the steel. The Equal Justice Initiative feels that this memorial, along with other historical markers memorializing victims of racial lynching, can aid in reflecting a more honest history of the United States (Equal Justice Initiative). History should always have an accurate depiction of events that have occurred. While the past is examined in history, Our History can help guide the future, through the present. The present connects the past and future by allowing one to look in the past for reference, see the progression from the past in the present, and then search for ways to further progress into the future.

To understand what impressions the museum and memorial left on attendants other than myself, I interviewed my friend, Xzarria Peterson. I wanted to view her perspective after going through the same spaces I did. So, when I asked her about the exhibits and whether she was surprised by any of the information that she observed, her response was: "I was thoroughly surprised by just how many records were kept because in school we always learned that slavery wasn't really something accounted for." I had the same reaction; it was not until I started to attend university that I found out just how engrained the Institution of Slavery was and that records were kept on the conditions of slaves for business and operational management of the campus facilities. I then asked for Xzarria's opinion on the future of race relations and education in the United States and she described them as "heading backward." She proceeded to explain that the current political climate along with the rigidity of racism remains, even in a subdued manner.

This hot-tempered climate is detrimental to our society, especially among minority and marginalized communities because the divisive political climate is working against everything that minorities and marginalized communities have fought for throughout this country's history. Furthermore, with the debate of what should be taught in public education and how it should be taught, many see state and local governments challenging the truth by disguising facts as a way of giving parents the right to have a say in their children's education. Others view it as just as briefly mentioned, a way for the state and local governments to disguise and distort the truth of slavery and racism in this country. Critical Race Theory (CRT) ideology has also been misconstrued in the last couple of years. From the way people express the need to keep or remove CRT and DEI initiatives from the educational sphere, it can only be inferred that debates on this topic will continue within our country's discourse. Finally, I asked Xzarria if she thought museums would lead the way in providing a more reliable and accurate view of Our History, to which she replied: "Museums like this one will continue to show the real truth behind Our History... it's up to society on whether they want to believe it or not."

As Xzarria expressed, it will ultimately be up to us to acknowledge the truths behind the history of race in our society. Over time, we will live through more pivotal moments in the histories that have yet to occur. It is up to us to continue truthfully educating ourselves. There may come a time when we must turn to these venues as a source of integrity for historical truth. They will offer us an insightful path forward for generating conversation, thus fostering knowledge that can be dispersed across greater lengths within our social discourse. Only when our society reaches a consensus will we move forward and continue to address more societal issues in the future.

What Does This Mean for History and Rhetoric within Our Social Discourse?

This means we can understand how history develops around us throughout our lives. We have countless documented historical events that have been with us for hundreds of years. Understanding this idea of history can help us realize the consequences of historical events and evaluate how we have progressed from those past events. Walking through the museum and memorial in Montgomery allowed me to see how far the United States has come in addressing its dark past regarding race relations. It has also made me realize that more work is needed to ensure everyone in this country feels acknowledged and safe. The state of our criminal justice system has led to scores of people in the United States being incarcerated at alarming rates, most disproportionately affecting minority communities. This is seen by many as an extension of the oppression that has plagued Black people since the abolition of slavery and with the weaponization of the State Department at the height of the Civil Rights Movement.

We must also realize that history has multiple moments within all our experiences, drawing on various perspectives. These experiences are shared among all people who saw these events unfold firsthand and those who study the events and their aftermath. An example would be during my group's tour of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Seeing the names of people who were lynched in the memorial shows that people were there to commit and witness these heinous acts. Also, the families and lives that were upended by the racist machinations that were prevalent at the time were deeply woven into the experiences of those who lived during the mass state-sanctioned racial terror in this country. Based on this understanding, I do not consider "History" with a capital "h" to convey meaning in the general sense of speaking on the subject for what it is. However, I feel that we should discuss the fact that Our History is shared, among different perspectives, as a collective, and with that sort of closeness there is a certain weight embedded within it that the "h" must then be capitalized. Capitalizing history in the shared experience creates a sense of unity across different backgrounds that can be spotlighted and not forgotten. There are cases in which, specific histories are always seen with the "H" for these histories are specified snapshots within the human historical theatre. The different eras of history are pertinent to their classifications, these moments are not just surface-level episodic events like describing to someone what the overarching meaning of history is as a subject. This differentiation should be considered, not as grammatically prescriptive, but more theoretically, colloquially, and grammatically descriptive.

Rhetoric is more technical in practice. It is the underlying mechanism in any written work published or promoted. We commonly see rhetoric used when we communicate ideals to others to persuade a person or group to perceive these ideals differently or to inform an audience about a topic or issue. It is known that using rhetoric results in an audience feeling a certain way or pathos after reading a written work. Discussions and debates require rhetorical implementation, allowing for education to exist and for people to obtain a new perspective. So, when we tie history and rhetoric together, we have a platform to convey ideals about any moment in history and how that history has impacted societies. By acknowledging this understanding of history and being cautious about how we use rhetoric to frame narratives, we can work to discern messages and perspectives that harm others and foster positive discourse within our society. We are all witnesses to history in our lives. It is up to us to call out what we view from the past being replayed in front of us and to plant new ideas of unity and common understanding among all groups of people, regardless of our differences.

Equal Justice Initiative. "Why Build a Lynching Memorial?" <https://youtu.be/S6lkFs1gsio?si=VI-stfy9u4rFZWmy>.

Pruitt-Young, Sharon. "Slavery Didn't End on Juneteenth. What You Should Know About This Important Day." NPR, June 17, 2021 <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/17/1007315228/juneteenth-what-is-origin-observation>.

The Legacy Museum. <https://legacysites.eji.org/about/museum/>.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice. <https://legacysites.eji.org/about/memorial/>.