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Historic Preservation: What It Means For Black Lives To Matter In Holly Springs

To the Editor:
The public protests as responses to the shooting deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks and countless other black people in the contemporary U.S. have become points of reflection for many of us. Race is at the center of private and public discussions in ways that it has not been before. As those who believe in historic preservation as one form of reparation for slavery and its sustained impacts, we reflect on what this moment means in the context of historic preservation in Holly Springs.

What have we witnessed?
In the past 10 years, we have observed several significant efforts to publicly address the systemic silencing of black history in Holly Springs. Behind the Big House, a slave dwelling interpretation program which prioritizes the experiences of those enslaved in Holly Springs, is one of them. The program, managed by Preserve Marshall County and Holly Springs Inc., began in 2011 and remains the only multi-site historic preservation entity sustained by local community members. Out of that came Gracing the Table, a racial reconciliation group charged with helping to repair the impacts of slavery and its manifestation of systemic racism in the present.

Most recently, we had the unveiling of historical markers to honor the lives and contributions of people who attended the Rosenwald School and W.T. Sims School, the first public schools for African Americans in Holly Springs; and dedications of two markers in honor of journalist, antilynching advocate, suffragist, and activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett. These efforts, and others, reflect a public desire to preserve and personify the significant contributions of African Americans to Holly Springs. These efforts are not only meaningful to local historic preservation but respond to a nationwide gap in recognizing the contributions of Africans and their descendants in the U.S. This disparity is a real one with a long history of historic preservation efforts in the U.S. valuing the histories of those able to record it, mostly rich White men.

Why is this important?
Holly Springs is no different than many other antebellum cities with a cultural landscape that honors early White settlers who built their wealth through the enslavement of others. After the region's Chickasaw occupation, the city was founded by White men and women who either economically benefited from the institution of slavery on the East Coast or who moved West to frontier Mississippi to profit from the free labor of enslaved people. Holly Springs, and its historical prominence, are here because slavery mattered.

This cultural moment is an opportune time to reflect on what that history means to residents and descendants of Holly Springs, and whether the historic preservation landscape in Holly Springs reflects how much slavery really mattered, and how much of an impact the institution has on how we see ourselves today.

What does this opportunity offer?
This opportunity offers a chance for the people of Holly Springs to think about the individuals and institutions that reflect not only who we are but who we hope to be. If we really want black lives to matter in the present and future, as many expressed at the march on June 12, then the black lives of our city's past must also matter. What memorials (historic sites, street signs, parks, etc.) are dedicated to African American individuals and institutions in Holly Springs? Where are they in the city and why are they in certain locations? Are they prominently and equally featured when guests visit Holly Springs? This is not a question about the ecumenical costs of making long-overdue changes, but whether our willingness and agency exist to repair nearly 200 years of damage to black residents and their ancestors in Holly Springs.

We must ask ourselves what we want to collectively remember and why? This question cannot be separated from an ongoing national campaign for black equity, or from local economic opportunities associated with heritage tourism. We have made some small strides in the latter but have neglected to frame our community development discussions about what it means for Black lives to really matter to heritage tourism in Holly Springs. What might it matter for Holly Springs to not be "All Kinds of Character," but "The Birthplace of Ida B. Wells," a black woman who is also one of the most significant historical figures in the world? What about her would we not want to be? What can the Rosenwald and W.T. Sims schools tell us about the long history of inequity in education in Mississippi from slavery until the present-day? What can they tell us about what fortitude it takes for black Americans to survive despite systemic racism? What might it mean for Holly Springs' antebellum mansions to not be disconnected from the slave dwellings that made them matter, from the enslaved men and women who labored in spite of being policed in every facet of their lives? What can they tell us about how black Americans are policed today? If the slave dwellings do not matter as much as the big houses, then doesn't that indicate that the descendants of enslaved people don't matter as much as the descendants of those who enslaved them? These are just a few questions. There are too many to ask in this space. What we do hope is that our reflection helps give voice to those already thinking about these issues and provides a starting point for others.

To know history is to understand the times you find yourself in. It is to be aware of what is taking place in your environment and being a cognizant participant. Our country is in a defining moment for us and our future. It matters what we do. What each one of us chooses to do in this moment will determine the future of our country for generations. The drafting of the Declaration of Independence, the three-fifth compromise, and the 1965 Civil Rights Act were all moments in history where our leaders made decisions about who we were. What kind of country will we choose to be? What kind of city will we choose to be?

To know history is also to understand the responsibility of your contribution to it. In a just society, one's thoughts and actions matter and equitably affect everyone else. This is an awesome inherent responsibility of being alive, of being human. Life grants us all this opportunity to affect one and another. We make history in our communities every day. What will be your contribution to our history? Will you be a cognizant active participant for the greater good? Will you act in what you perceive to be your self-interest alone? Will you choose to be silent, not pay attention, not participate. We all have a choice. How do we want our community to move forward from this moment? Do we want to create a society that is conducive to the benefit of all its citizens?

Since 2012, Gracing the Table has worked to help Holly Springs tell and talk through uncomfortable truths about the history of our community. We plan to continue that work with others, thinking more specifically about history's impact on contemporary Black lives and what that means for all of us.

Sincerely, Wayne Jones
Gracing the Table

we choose to take at the ballot box, in the streets, in the boardrooms, in places of worships, in the mom and pop shops, in schools, in police stations, in governmental bodies at all levels, in our health care institutions, and in media will determine the extent and shape of democracy for coming generations. Long may the struggle persevere until justice for all prevails." Dr. Hunter, professor of History and African American Studies at Princeton University, is a scholar of labor, gender, race, and Southern history.

While Covid 19 continues to challenge us and places obstacles in our path, we forge ahead. One of our journalism students, Brittany Brown, created a video on Davidson High School for a project this spring semester. Here is the link, <https://youtu.be/o3jkXieUySU> and it is also posted on my website. Brittany has obtained a fellowship to continue this great work this summer. It is my hope that she will expand the video to include information from Article 44, June 19, 2020, about the principal, Professor E.C. Davidson Sr., his family and legacy. Wouldn't we love to see and hear more from his son, Kerry, and his stepdaughter, Gwendolyn. Not to mention the former teachers and students who were a part of the 48 years of the Davidson School era. These are the stories that we have begun to archive and preserve as black history.

Your feedback and comments have always been important to me. Let me hear from you if you have ideas or suggestions. All 44 articles including this one can be found on my website. Also check there to keep informed as the Black Families of Yalobusha County project moves forward.

Since my last article, just barely three weeks ago, where I spoke about watching the Raeford, North Carolina memorial service for George Floyd, I found myself watching the funeral service here in Atlanta for another black man killed by the police. As the eulogist, Pastor Raphael Warnock, said while the two cases are different, both men are dead. Dr. Bernice King mentioned how she could relate to Rayshard Brooks' eight-year-old daughter, Blessing, because she was only five when her father, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. The names of Rayshard Brooks' children really resonate with me: Blessing, Memory, two-years old, and Dream, only one year old.

As this column goes on hiatus, I pray that we do not have to add another name to the already much too long list of Rayshard Brooks, George Floyd, Breanna Taylor and Ahmaud Aubrey. While many of us are wearing our masks, washing our hands, staying home and social distancing, I leave you with this prayer by Ruth Padilla Deborst, a Latin American-born theologian:

*May we who are merely inconvenienced remember those whose lives are at stake.
May we who have no risk factors remember those most vulnerable.
May we who have the luxury of working from home remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent.
May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close remember those who have no options.
May we who have to cancel our trips remember those who have no safe place to go.
May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market remember those who have no margin at all.
May we who settle in for a quarantine at home remember those who have no home.
As fear grips our world, let us choose love.
During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms*



Black women standing on the steps of the Water Valley Courthouse include Jane Williams Pritchard (12/20/1871- 9/15/1969), the grandmother of Dottie Reed, wearing a white bonnet - second row on the right.

around each other, let us find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbors.

I had intended to end this column on this high note until Dr. Jessie Wilkerson shared the following letter to the editor of The South Reporter published last week about the current state of affairs at our neighbors to the north, Holly Springs. I felt most compelled to include it (left side of the page) because Holly Springs is the birthplace of not just an outstanding black woman but a journalist, an anti-lynching advocate, a suffragist, and an activist - Ida B. Wells-Barnett. She was born July 16, 1862. The letter is entitled, "Historic preservation: What it means for black lives to matter in Holly Springs."

It was written by Gracing the Table (GTT), a racial healing and discussion group in Holly Springs, who organize events designed to get local citizens to think about the African American past's impact on the present.

A Note From A Northern Reader

Mississippi's most well-known outstanding black woman is surely Fannie Lou Hamer, the political activist who demonstrated profound courage at great personal peril. Her national prominence is both understandable and well deserved.

The outstanding black women of Yalobusha County featured in this column, while less heralded beyond their community, showed their own courage day after day. In a segregated world for much of their lives, they kept families intact, nurturing them along with friends and neighbors. Through organizations, civic and religious, they displayed their manifest talents and leadership.

Special Note: Ruby Turner pointed out the following errors in the article about Professor Davidson published in the Herald on June 18, 2020. The title of founder was used incorrectly as Davidson was a public school. According to her, Professor Davidson started as principal of the Water Valley Colored School, 1st through 8th grade in 1919. His oldest daughter, Gwendolyn, is only 97, born in October 1923. We received conflicting information from sources and the obituary as printed. His youngest daughter's name was Hazel not Helen as reported in error.

Junior Auxiliary of Water Valley Announces the 2020 Jessie D. Ostrander Scholarship Recipient

The Junior Auxiliary of Water Valley would like to congratulate **Calin Drane** for being awarded the **Jessie D. Ostrander Scholarship**. Calin wrote an exceptional essay to earn the scholarship. He is the son of **Ronnell Drane and Kathy Walls**, and stepson of **Timothy Brown**. Calin plans to attend **Northwest Mississippi Community College** this fall and will pursue an education degree.

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