

America was long ignored — and still is in some places



Dolly, an enslaved woman whom Andrew Johnson bought at 14, holds his grandson. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



Historical interpreter Edwin Cooke III, of Williamsburg, left, gives a colonial writing lesson to visitors at the Randolph house in Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. STEVE HELBER/AP

grams that reach out to urban high schools and students at historically black colleges and universities.

Glossing over the reality

But even amid the push to confront historical atrocities, some sites and museums still avoid giving prominent attention to slavery.

The museum at the Tennessee childhood home of Andrew Johnson, president from 1865 to 1869, glosses over his role in keeping America segregated and unequal after the Civil War, some say.

Johnson, at the time Abraham Lincoln's vice president, freed his eight personal slaves on Aug. 8, 1863, celebrated in the state as Emancipation Day. That was more than seven months after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

Then, as president after Lincoln's assassination, Johnson overturned "40 acres and a mule," a Union

military order to give formerly enslaved blacks property confiscated from Confederate landowners. He resisted giving black people the right to vote.

Aaron Astor, an Andrew Johnson expert and Maryville College historian, said it is vital to tell the entire story of Johnson's life in order.

"There's a wider ambivalence of how to deal with the legacies of slavery in a place like Appalachia, where people kind of take pride that they were not the slaveholding South," Astor said. "Yes, that's true, but their hands are not entirely clean. They did have slavery."

Similarly, the fight over the expansion of slavery before the Civil War is central to Midwestern history — but not always advertised.

In LeCompton, Kansas, slavery supporters gathered to write an 1857 constitution that legalized ownership of other humans in the territory, which at the time was moving toward statehood. It was an episode in the violent battle known as Bleeding Kansas.

Now the small town on the Kansas River is a must-see for history buffs. Its marketing labels itself as the "Civil War Birth Place" and, more controversially, "Where Slavery Began to Die."

"No one likes to be on the wrong side of history," said Jonathan Earle, a Louisiana State University historian.

Despite its euphemistic slogan, the town is best known for the pro-slavery constitution, Earle said. "It was like a slaveholder's wildest dreams." The document ultimately failed, rejected both by Kansas' voters and the U.S. House of Representatives in 1858.

People who want a full view of the brutal fight for freedom in Kansas, Earle said, should make sure they're taking in multiple perspectives. Earle was involved in the creation of Freedom's Frontier, a National Heritage Area that spans across Missouri and Kansas and includes sites such as Quindaro, an abolitionist town settled by escaped slaves on the Missouri River.

A shift from sanitization

Over the past couple of decades, historic monuments have begun to move away from whitewashing the past, according to Caroline Janney, a University of Virginia historian who specializes in the public memory of the Civil War.

"There are very few places that I've been to in recent years where I would say it's been sanitized or left out," Janney said of slavery.

She said education efforts are improving, though slowly and with exceptions.

This past summer, an angry review of a historic plantation tour went viral on social media, after white reviewers said they were "extremely disappointed" when the tour guide talked about slavery. "We didn't come to hear a lecture on how the white people treated slaves," the reviewer wrote, "we came to get this history of a southern plantation" — as if slavery and plantation history are separable.

History is about telling the truth, Janney said. "It means confronting those ugly parts of our past as well as the quite wonderful and amazing parts of our past. ... It's not a negative story. It's just an honest story."

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Role of Slavery in America was long ignored