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New historical markers document Montgomery's role in the slave trade

By Kala Kachmar

In the 1850s, Montgomery had the second largest slave population in the country.

Every month, thousands of slaves were imported to the city from other parts of the country by way of railroad and the Alabama River. Every day, hundreds of slaves were taken off boats, chained together and paraded up Commerce Street.

By the start of the Civil War in 1861, Montgomery had more slave depots than churches or schools.

"Montgomery was a very prominent and critical part of the slave trade in America," said Bryan Stevenson, executive director of the Montgomery-based nonprofit legal firm Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). "The forced migration of thousands of enslaved people from the upper South to the Deep South in the 19th century is a phenomenon most people don't understand."

On Tuesday, the Equal Justice Initiative and the Black Heritage Council, which is part of the Alabama Historical Commission, dedicated three new historical markers documenting the history of the slave trade in Montgomery.

The Black Heritage Council is a statewide organization that advocates for the preservation of African-American historical places, artifacts and culture, said Frazine Taylor, chair of the council.



Bryan Stevenson, right, executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, applauds with others after an unveiling of a slave trade historical marker in Montgomery on Tuesday. At left in hat is Chris Chalk, one of the actors in the film '12 Years a Slave.' Standing next to Chalk is Black Heritage Council Chair Frazine Taylor. / AP

The dedication and markers are part of a bigger project, the race and poverty project, which Stevenson says will educate people about the legacy of slavery and the lasting effects that still exist in society today. The EJI has released a 58-page book called "Slavery in America: The Montgomery Slave Trade."

He said the myths and attitudes that were created as a result of slavery are directly responsible for the decades of terror and lynching that followed slavery as well as more modern problems such as racial profiling, guilt and discomfort in conversations about race.

"You can't understand civil rights or the Civil War without an appreciation of slavery and what the slave trade did to places like Montgomery," he said.

A two-sided sign was put up outside Union Station that describes both the slave trade by ship and by train. Another sign was unveiled outside EJI's building at 122 Commerce St., which was once a slave warehouse. The third sign will go up in about a week at the corner of Monroe and Lawrence streets. It will note the slave depots that existed on Dexter Avenue.

"These buildings and spaces were places of tremendous agony," Stevenson said.

Montgomery Mayor Todd Strange said he was hesitant to allow the organization to put up the historical markers about slavery.

"It's history," Strange said, adding that the city already has a marker that memorializes the events of slave trade in Montgomery at the Court Square Fountain on Dexter Avenue, where slaves were once traded. He said part of the reason he agreed to allow EJI to place the markers on public rights-of-way is because it will promote tourism for the city.

"I would have preferred not to have the additional markers, but I believe they are part of history," he said.

Stevenson said the goal with the markers and the report to educate and to encourage an elevated consciousness about this part of the city's history. He said the markers will be the beginning of an important conversation "we all need to have."

"I definitely think that we could and should do a lot better at educating people about the legacy of slavery," he said. "Part of the reason we were interested in these markers is because we have dozens on the Civil War experience and many about the civil rights movement. But we don't have many about slavery."

Taylor said the organization has been working with the EJI for months on the project.

"Too often history is lost because no one tells the story associated with a structure, a place or an event," she said. "Let us move on to tell more stories in the city and in other cities across the state, one marker at a time."

Stevenson said all people — black and white — are shaped by the legacy of slavery.

"Talking about this is a challenge, but it's a necessity," he said.

At the dedication ceremony, Chris Chalk, an actor who played a slave in the recent movie "12 Years a Slave" talked about the importance of the project and of understanding the history of slavery today. He also talked about the difficulties associated with playing a part in such an emotional and controversial movie.

"It's new. We don't talk about this. We don't talk about this in any honorable way," he said. "And this is my first experience seeing slavery as a human experience and not an institution — as, you know, individual stories of people surviving, as opposed to, 'this bad thing happened, let's push it to the side.'"

Chalk said by being in the movie, he and the other actors took a responsibility they didn't even realize they took.

"These white Academy members who aren't wanting to see the film need to know that it's their shame and guilt, too."