Tourism, Terrorism, and the Memory of Slavery in Charleston, South Carolina

By Blain Roberts and Ethan J. Kytle

Nine hours before American terrorist Dylann Storm Roof murdered nine people during a Bible study meeting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, we were sitting in the office of the city’s long-time mayor, Joseph P. Riley, Jr. A progressive white Democrat who owes his four decades in office to Charleston’s large black community, Riley spoke enthusiastically about the racial strides that the city has made during his tenure.

Since he was first elected in 1975, Riley has sought to break down barriers in Charleston. Under his watch, for example, the city has hired and promoted dozens of African American and female professionals. The mayor has also been a strong advocate for black history—a significant stance in a city that was once the American capital of slavery and is today a thriving mecca of historical tourism. A center of both the transatlantic and domestic slave trades, Charleston had a black and enslaved majority for much of its early history. Slave labor built the historic homes, churches, and buildings that attract millions of visitors each year. Yet throughout the twentieth century, locals and tourists alike could wander the streets of the city and learn very little about the lives of the enslaved or their descendants.

One of Mayor Riley’s first (and most controversial) moves in office was to commission a portrait of Denmark Vesey, the leader of a failed slave uprising in 1822 and a founding member of Emanuel AME Church, to hang in Gaillard Municipal Auditorium. More recently, he has signed on to the campaign led by community activists and public historians seeking to reshape Charleston’s commemorative landscape. In our conversation with the mayor, he emphasized the headway the city has made toward establishing an International African American Museum. Representing the culmination of this broad-based historical reinterpretation—and, in many ways, Riley’s final act of racial reconciliation—the museum will be located on the site of the former Gadsden’s Wharf, where thousand of slaves were offloaded into Charleston to be sold.

“We have a duty,” the mayor argued, “to honor those who were brought here, enslaved, and helped build our country.”

After our meeting with the mayor, as the two of us headed off to the archives to complete the research for our co-authored book on the memory of slavery in Charleston, we discussed our own sense of hopefulness. Riley is right. Things have indeed improved. Back in 2005, when we moved to the city for what ended up being a two-year stay, we rarely encountered the black past or slavery on the many house, walking, and carriage tours we took. Even our search for a

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place to live highlighted a kind of willful forgetting. One landlady defended her decision to call a basement apartment we viewed the former “servant’s quarters,” rather than slave quarters, since, as she put it, there was no evidence in the historical record that the people who had lived and worked there before the Civil War were not paid. It was quite a double negative, an example of the tortured logic some Charlestonians employed to distance themselves and their city from slavery.

But the pace of change in Charleston has been remarkable since we left in 2007. Local plantations have restored slave cabins and now offer tours that focus on the African American experience. Some even confront the brutality and violence upon which slavery depended. The city has opened a museum that examines the domestic slave trade on a portion of a former slave-auction complex. It has also installed nearly a dozen markers commemorating key figures and moments in the struggle against slavery and for black civil rights. And in 2014, after a nearly twenty-year battle against those who deemed Denmark Vesey a “terrorist,” a group called the Spirit of Freedom Monument Committee erected a statue of the black revolutionary in a city park. As we strolled through Charleston last week, we overheard several tour guides talking about the region’s history of slavery. One even discussed plantation overseers and slave drivers, topics that were virtually unspeakable a mere decade ago.

All of this has been on our minds since we awoke last Thursday morning to the news of Dylann Roof’s unimaginable actions in Emanuel AME Church. Like the rest of the nation, we have struggled to make sense of this barbarism. For us, this has meant filtering it through the lenses of historical tourism and public memory in Charleston.

In a city that has come so far in confronting its past, one man used his own warped understanding of American history to rationalize taking the lives of nine black women and men. According to a manifesto that appears to have been written by Roof, “historical lies, exaggerations and myths” about how poorly African Americans were treated under slavery are today being used to justify a black takeover of the United States. Framing himself as a white savior in the tradition of the Ku Klux Klan, the manifesto’s author explains that he targeted Charleston because “it is [the] most historic city in my state” and it once had “the highest ratio of blacks to Whites in the country.”

Photographs taken of Roof in the months before the shootings show him visiting a number of historic sites in South Carolina, including several in the Charleston area. One photo from March depicts Roof standing next to the historical marker at nearby Sullivan’s Island, which commemorates the site where nearly 40% of African slaves entered the United States “under extreme conditions of human bondage and degradation.” In April, he posed in front of Boone Hall Plantation and McLeod Plantation, both located just outside Charleston. At each site, he visited the slave quarters, and, at McLeod, the slave burial ground as well. In all of the images, a menacing Roof stares at the camera, his hatred now all too easy to discern.
These trips did nothing to change Roof’s historical misconceptions. Instead, they appear to have functioned as a perverse form of tourism porn, pumping him up for his self-appointed “mission” to murder the Emanuel worshippers.

Roof’s historical pilgrimages to Charleston raise troubling questions about the efficacy of correcting a flawed vision of the past. Our book, like the efforts of those Charlestonians who have worked to alter their city’s historical narrative, is rooted in the belief that a more accurate and inclusive public memory will pay tangible benefits in the present and future. The Emanuel massacre, we admit, leaves this faith somewhat shaken.

At the same time, we cannot entirely abandon the optimism we felt that morning in Joe Riley’s office. While many Americans remain ignorant about the harsh realities of slavery—wittingly and unwittingly condoning the denial at the heart of Roof’s own interpretation of the peculiar institution—they are not true believers, their minds are not sealed off to new information. That it has taken the murder of nine people to spark a national conversation about the Confederate battle flag is shameful. But we have been heartened by the emerging consensus that the flag, with which Roof posed on multiple occasions, must be removed from the grounds of the South Carolina state capitol. By Monday, even politicians who just days earlier had equivocated on the issue, such as Governor Nikki Haley and Senator Lindsey Graham, were calling for the flag’s removal. The outcry suggests that the argument made by critics for decades, that the flag symbolizes white supremacy—specifically, the South’s dedication to preserving slavery and, later, segregation—is gaining traction among the wider public, even in South Carolina.

This is just the kind of sea change in historical understanding that the city of Charleston, the state of South Carolina, and the nation as a whole, need. But removing the flag is not enough.

The impressive outpouring of support for the Emanuel victims should be harnessed to do more. It is high time that we begin talking honestly about gun control, race relations and racial violence, and the connections between white supremacist groups, such as the Council of Conservative Citizens, and the Republican Party.

We must also work harder to educate Americans about the history of slavery and its legacies. Constructing the International African American Museum is a good place to start. Mayor Riley told us that the projected cost for the approximately 40,000-square-foot center is $75 million, a burden he would like to see shared equally by city and county governments, the state, and private donors. The Charleston City and Charleston County councils have already allocated their $25 million, and last year the state appropriated $5 million. So far, the mayor has only managed to raise $1 million from private sources.

When we met with Riley last Wednesday, he was anxiously awaiting word on whether the legislature would approve an additional $5 million in this year’s budget, a decision that will likely come sometime this week. Meanwhile, several companies have announced donations in honor of the victims and the church—as of Monday afternoon, Boeing, Starbucks, and the Carolina Panthers had each pledged $100,000—indicating a willingness on the part of
businesses to help with the painful process of healing. We trust that some will deem the museum worthy of their generosity, too.

Mayor Joe Riley, *Atlantic Monthly* correspondent Ta-Nehisi Coates, and President Barack Obama, among others, have called for the Confederate flag to be taken down and put in a museum. We agree. Take it down and put it in the new International African American museum—as part of a larger exhibit on the recent events at Emanuel AME Church. The nine victims and their families deserve as much. Indeed, they deserve far more.