

# Legacies “Disremembered:” Re-reading Moments of Emancipation<sup>1</sup>

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In preparing these brief remarks, I have found the ironies of the calendar inescapable and thus difficult to ignore. For, you see, 2015 is at once a sesquicentennial year *and* a semi-centennial. One hundred fifty years ago, the American Civil War ended and the nation’s postwar reconstruction began. Fifty years ago, a struggle for basic civil rights climaxed with the passage of the Voting Rights Act, once again a moment of beginning as well as an ending. So, how does one turn a moment marking the end of the nation’s civil war into a commemoration of emancipation? How does the fifty-year anniversary of a twentieth-century emancipation crash the party of that nineteenth-century moment, fully a century and a half earlier?

The inspiration for this talk is the last chapter of Willie Lee Rose’s magnificent work *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*,<sup>1</sup> a study of what today might be called a joint federal–private partnership of social engineering, designed to determine just how former slaves would respond to life after slavery. Would they go savage? Would they work and thus sustain the traditional southern plantation economy as free wage laborers? Would they adopt the mores and manners of civilized white people? Having declared that the nation could no longer endure half slave and half free, it was yet to be determined whether the nation could entrust the southern economy to a free black labor force, a serious, pressing question since for most of the nation’s existence to that point, slave labor had supplied a disproportionate share of the nation’s export earnings.<sup>2</sup> Rose’s book is a sensitive exploration of these questions as they were confronted by a motley band of abolitionists that included both free labor theorists and crass opportunists, both of whom followed Union troops to the recently conquered Sea Islands off the coasts of

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1 Read 12 November 2015.

Georgia and South Carolina, an area later made famous by George Gershwin's folk opera, *Porgy and Bess*.

The committed abolitionists among that group called themselves "Gideonites," a reference to the small band that the biblical Gideon of the book of *Judges* led into Canaan to destroy the false god Baal and deliver the Israelites from bondage. Similarly, their nineteenth-century American counterparts were determined to free southern blacks not only from physical slavery but also slavery's psychological and cultural effects. They would teach them literacy and history and prepare them to be free laborers working for a better life rather than from coercion.

The final chapter of Rose's book is bittersweet, however. The title of that chapter, "Revolutions May Go Backward . . .," announces the failure of the Gideonites' fondest hopes. The social and political order that emerged in the post-Civil War decades did not measure up to their dreams and sacrifices. Somewhat ironically, in this they repeated the fate of the Biblical Gideonites, whose work was also undone a generation later when the Israelites reverted again to worshipping the false god Baal.

Rose drew the title for that final chapter from Thomas Wentworth Higginson's memoir, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, in which he described his time as a soldier among the Gideonites.<sup>3</sup> A deeply committed abolitionist of New England origins, Higginson had been a divinity student at Harvard, a gunrunner in the Kansas guerrilla wars of the 1850s, and one of the secret supporters of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. With the outbreak of war, he volunteered to lead a combat regiment of freed slaves in the Carolinas.

On January 1, 1863, Higginson found himself in Beaufort, South Carolina, which had been captured a year earlier and now served as a refueling station for the Union Navy. Among the captured, however, were thousands of slaves, now abandoned by their masters who had fled to the Carolina mainland. Rather than treat their unexpected charges as "contraband of war," as had become the practice in other theaters, the decision was taken to use them to prove the superiority of free labor over the whip. Thus was born the so-called Port Royal experiment, designed to prove that freed slaves could successfully make the transition to freedom, that they would learn to work for wages, while embracing a proper Christian and civilized lifestyle—which were, in their minds, pretty much the same thing.

Some months after the Gideonites' arrival, "the experiment" had received a powerful boost, when in September 1862 President Lincoln declared his intent to free all slaves still in rebel hands, effective the following New Year's Day. The status of the conquered Sea Islands was a bit ambiguous under Lincoln's mandate because the territory and its black inhabitants were no longer in rebel hands; consequently, the

Proclamation technically did not apply. Nonetheless, black and white residents of the islands gathered that New Year’s Day to celebrate the president’s historic decree.

During that ceremony, Higginson was moved by “an incident so simple, so touching, so utterly unexpected and startling, that I can scarcely believe it on recalling, though it gave the keynote to the whole day.”<sup>4</sup> Just after a southern white Union loyalist had read Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, there was an extraordinary event that shook the assembled crowd. As Higginson described it:

The very moment the speaker had ceased, and just as I took and waved the flag, which now for the first time meant anything to these poor people, there suddenly arose, close beside the platform, a strong male voice (rather cracked and elderly), into which two women’s voices instantly blended, singing, as if by an impulse that could no more be repressed than the morning note of a song-sparrow,—

My Country, ‘tis of, thee,  
Sweet land of liberty,  
Of thee I sing!

Even as people looked around to see from whence these voices came, the other black people there joined in. “I never saw anything so electric;” wrote Higginson, “it made all other words cheap; it seemed the choked voice of a race at last unloosed.” These “unknown people’s song” brought tears to every eye, he reported. And in Higginson’s fond, poignant remembrance, “art could not have dreamed of a tribute to the day of jubilee that should be so affecting.” To which the colonel added a curious addendum: “history will not believe it; . . .”<sup>5</sup> What could that mean? Why, how would such an event *not* be believed? How would the meaning of freedom so powerfully etched that day be erased from historical memory? What would be the consequence of such erasure?

A diary entry a week after the emancipation ceremony suggests something of what the colonel feared. He reports hearing rumors that an armistice was in the offing.<sup>6</sup> No doubt such a rumor seems farfetched to us now, knowing that the war, then just 21 months old would drag on for another 27, ending only when the nation’s penance for its original sin had been sated: in Lincoln’s haunted phrase, “until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.”<sup>7</sup> But for those living through that moment, the hope—and for some the fear—was ubiquitous that “responsible” parties would somehow come to their senses and call a truce to this terrible war. Indeed, Lincoln had hoped that his preliminary

emancipation proclamation, carefully crafted to free slaves only in areas still in rebellion, would achieve precisely that outcome. And, indeed, that is precisely what the people gathered on the Carolina Sea Islands most feared and deplored, since a premature peace would very likely leave slavery in place in much of the South.

So, this was the context for the passage Willie Lee Rose would later quote. Colonel Higginson's observation emerged as he reflected on the recent history of revolutionary upheavals in Europe roughly two decades earlier, among them the much celebrated independence movement in Hungary, which ended in defeat, exile, and subjugation of its freedom fighters. "After the experience of Hungary," Higginson observed darkly, "one sees that revolutions *may* go backward." It was a lesson especially disturbing for southern blacks and their white northern supporters because it was now clear that "the habit of injustice seems so deeply impressed upon the whites, that it is hard to believe in the possibility of anything better. I dare not yet hope that the promise of the President's Proclamation will be kept."<sup>8</sup>

Higginson's worse fears turned out to be prescient, and his words must haunt any celebration this year of that "new birth of freedom"<sup>9</sup> a century and a half ago. Revolutions may go backward, not because of the inadequacies of its beneficiaries but, as Higginson feared, because of the depth and tenacity of the oppressive forces they were left to struggle alone to overcome. The thrust of Rose's book was that these illiterate freedpeople did indeed possess the skills, talents, and understanding that fitted them to fashion a successful transition to life after slavery, but that their friends and sometimes supporters were often not much better prepared than their enemies to recognize that fact, as they would soon tire of the fight and abandon the freedpeople to the tender mercies of their former masters.

What Rose did not see—writing in the middle of a movement to finally make right the abandoned project of a new birth of freedom and just a year before the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was achieved—was how "history" itself could be turned against the emancipatory goal. One imagines that she did not pause at Higginson's prescient notation that "history will not believe it." Perhaps it seemed hardly possible to her that the memory of that hopeful moment of national liberation would not simply be forgotten but distorted beyond recognition. In the years following that January evening in Beaufort, only black Americans would continue to celebrate January 1st as the day of Jubilee. The rest of the nation would turn its attention to various memorial days, intent on reconciling the North and South. The message of those commemorations was that those who fought to defend the Union and those who sought to destroy it were somehow both right—they were somehow both

patriots.<sup>10</sup> Just months before the 50th anniversary of the war’s end was celebrated, that sectional reconciliation was embedded in concrete by building the Lincoln Memorial on the Washington Mall, just a short walk from the monument dedicated to George Washington, the founding father of the slaveholders’ republic. Of course, those seeking sectional reconciliation at its dedication in 1922 could not have anticipated that this very site would soon become a symbol of black aspirations to fulfill their long-delayed hopes for social justice and a gathering place for protests to achieve them. Aspirations and hopes that echoed those of the freedpeople gathered at Beaufort on that cold January day in 1863.<sup>11</sup>

It was only in the midst of the Civil Rights Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s that the historical profession itself would begin to recognize the truth of the story that pioneering African American historians had been telling two decades earlier: that the nation had “disremembered”<sup>12</sup> the most important lessons from the terrible trauma of civil war and the national rebuilding that followed it. Thus I use that term to underscore an active rather than passive distortion of historical memory because the story of reconstruction that Higginson’s band of Gideonites had lived was turned on its head (much like the fate of their biblical namesakes). In future conventional historical accounts, northern idealists were rendered as predatory, black ex-slaves were inept, and the nation was better served by restoring the former ruling class to its rightful place.

Well, an unfortunate turn of events you might say, but does any of that really matter—especially to us today? Or to put it more bluntly still: Does history matter? What does it matter that we don’t get the history right?

Well, I believe it did matter in shaping at least one of Congress’s early debates about Civil Rights legislation in the 1950s. It was a debate necessitated by the disremembered struggle of the Gideonites’ crusade for equal justice almost a century earlier. During those debates, Hubert Humphrey, one of the nation’s most committed supporters of racial justice, rose on the Senate floor to defend a modest proposal to relax some of the restrictions on voting rights that suppressed southern blacks’ exercise of the franchise. Opponents had deployed the then-orthodox history of Reconstruction corruption and pillage to warn against going down that path again by letting “unqualified” blacks vote. Humphrey responded by actually confirming that historical memory (or rather disremembrance), declaring the Reconstruction to have been a shameful and dangerous path that the proposed legislation would not repeat.<sup>13</sup> Now, if even Hubert Humphrey held such a scary image of Reconstruction’s failure, it is surely likely that others in that chamber held similar and probably even more dire views of what social equality and full political participation by black folk might entail.

Given the political calculus of Congress in the 1950s, I do not intend to suggest that this misreading of history was decisive in shaping Congress's wholly inadequate response to black voter disfranchisement at that time—an inadequacy that would require another decade of bloody struggle by the southern civil rights movement to overcome. But surely the discursive framing of that legislation would have been different had the historical narrative been closer to the scene Thomas Wentworth Higginson had witnessed on that chilly January day, 152 years ago. It's not farfetched to think that that different image might well have pried away a few more votes to break the southern filibuster that made a stronger legislative response impossible.

The merits of that counter-factual historical speculation, notwithstanding, as a historian I have to believe that the stories we tell matter—if for no other reason than that they are likely to shape the terrain of contemporary aspirations and struggles. It follows, then, that whether we are commemorating events 150 years ago or just 50 years ago, it is important to get the story right. Certainly our history teaches us that the time-stamp on progressive change is not infinite. Revolutions may indeed go backward. We need look no further than the recent efforts to gut the voting rights achieved in the last great struggle for equal justice to find a powerful argument against complacency and historical “disremembering.”

#### ENDNOTES

1. Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).
2. For more on the economic dominance of slave-produced cotton, see Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Random House, 2014).
3. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984 [orig. 1869]).
4. Higginson, 60.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 65.
7. “The Inaugural Address of President Abraham Lincoln, Delivered at the National Capital, March 4th, 1865,” in The Gilder Lehrman Collection, Yale University, [www.gilderlehrman.org](http://www.gilderlehrman.org) (accessed June 4, 2016).
8. Higginson, 65.
9. Lincoln's phrase in the Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863.

10. For more on the nation’s curious history of sectional reconciliation, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard, 2001).
11. Among the most famous of these events was Martin Luther King’s address at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, but a quarter-century earlier (April 9, 1939), Marian Anderson gave a concert there after having been denied access to Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution. Echoing the Sea Island freedpeople, Anderson began her concert with “My Country Tis of Thee.”
12. I use “disremembered” because it conveys a sense not simply of a memory loss but also of traumatic losses actively or deliberately forgotten. The term is borrowed from a black sharecropper’s account of his life as told to Theodore Rosengarten in *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Knopf, 1974).
13. *Congressional Record, Senate*, 85th Congress, 1st Session, vol. 103, part 9, p. 14979 (July 17, 1957).