

What To Do With Boston's Emancipation Statue?

"People Are Trapped in History, and History Is Trapped In Them." James Baldwin

by Jeffrey Boutwell, Ph.D.

On December 6, 1879, The Boston Globe glowingly described the newly installed Emancipation Group statue in Park Square as representing the "most interesting, the most important and the most sublime event... in the history of the world."

The statue dedicated that day memorialized President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and depicted Lincoln holding a copy of the proclamation while standing over a crouching, half-clothed, former Black slave gripping a broken chain in his hands. The inscription at the base of the statue, a duplicate of the original in Washington, D.C. and a gift to the city of Boston from local businessman Moses Kimball, read, "a race set free and the country at peace."

The reality on that cold December day in Boston, however, 14 years after the end of the Civil War, was that Black Americans were anything but free, and the country was not at peace. The Reconstruction period following the war, designed to embed fun-

damental civil and legal protections into American law for the four million newly-freed Black slaves, was already dead.

The original Emancipation Group statue - the work of sculptor Thomas Ball, a Charlestown native - had been dedicated in Washington, D.C. on April 14, 1876, the eleventh anniversary of Lincoln's assassination. The dedication speech that day was given by the former enslaved Black, Frederick Douglass, the country's most famous and eloquent civil rights leader. In his usual blunt fashion, Douglass despaired that white opposition to federal government protection of Black voting rights and civil liberties, in both the South and North, was already making it easier to "scourge us beyond the range of human brotherhood."

Sitting on the speaker's stage near Douglass was the senior Senator from Massachusetts, George S. Boutwell, who fully shared Douglass' fears over growing white opposition to Reconstruction. As a Congressman in the late 1860s from the Seventh Massachusetts District

(today represented by Ayanna Pressley), Boutwell had been instrumental in helping to enact the Fourteenth and Fifteenth civil rights amendments. Now in the Senate, Boutwell was chair of a select committee formed to investigate white supremacist vio-

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Already in 1876, white America had had enough with Reconstruction. America's 100th birthday party was in full swing, and most Americans wanted to forget the Civil War and enjoy the growing economic prosperity of the Gilded Age. By 1879, as Frederick Douglass had predicted and George Boutwell had feared, Reconstruction was being swamped by the pervasive spread of Jim Crow policies and the structural racism that would shackle our society well into the 20th and 21st centuries.

Today, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, America is once again, as during Reconstruction, openly confronting its deep divides of racial injustice and economic inequality. From debates over 'critical race theory' to questions of reparations for the centuries of white economic theft of wealth created by Black labor, our country is having to face profoundly disturbing issues.

Central to these issues is how we as a society choose to memorialize the past. This includes the fate of hundreds of Confederate statues and other monuments to the "Lost Cause" of white supremacy, as well as tributes to prominent Americans who owned slaves, profited from the slave trade, or espoused 'scientific racism' theories, such as famed naturalist Louis Agassiz of Harvard University.

In Boston, the Emancipation Group statue was removed from Park Square in December 2020 and put into storage pending a decision by the Boston Art Commission to relocate the monument to "a new publicly accessible location where its history and context can be better explained." As of September 2021, no decision had yet been made on where to locate the statue, though some are suggesting that it be moved outside

the city or even shipped out of state.

That would be a travesty. It's vitally important that the Emancipation Group statue remain in Boston. As a 'gift' to the city, it is part of Boston's conflicted and complicated racial legacy. I suggest that it be housed in a new indoor location that would complement the Museum of African American History on Boston's Freedom Trail.

To provide appropriate historical context, other exhibits with the statue could include a video (or hologram) re-enactment of Frederick Douglass's painfully honest 1876 dedication speech, as well as graphic extracts from George Boutwell's Senate report in 1876 on white supremacist violence in Mississippi. A plaque on the wall would bear the quote from the Black author, James Baldwin, "people are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them."

Viewed together, these exhibits would bring home how Reconstruction and its promise of equality was already dying in 1876 as our country celebrated its 100th birthday. The totality of the exhibit would also, however, celebrate those Americans who sought to keep the Reconstruction dream alive. It would also remind us that, in just a few short years, America will be celebrating its 250th birthday. And the exhibit will ask us, where will we be in 2026 on the long arc of moral justice in reaching a more equitable, multi-racial society?

[Jeffrey Boutwell is a former resident of Groton and a distant relative of George S. Boutwell. He is the author of the forthcoming, Redeeming America's Promise: George S. Boutwell and the Politics of Race, Money, and Power, 1818-1905. This article is expanded from a previous version that appeared in Boston's Commonwealth magazine.]



lence in Mississippi during that state's infamous 1875 election campaign.

Traveling to Mississippi in the summer of 1876 to take first-hand testimony from victims of the violence, in which scores of Blacks and their white supporters were killed and hundreds injured, the Boutwell committee released its 2,000-page report in August. Public and press reaction ranged from apathy to outright hostility. The New York Times castigated the committee's recommendations for more federal protection of Black rights in the South as "nothing short of despotism," while the Nation magazine derided Boutwell as a "ghostly counsellor of incoherent folly."





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As a part of the ongoing growth, education, and commitment around DEI at Lawrence Academy, we are offering the following opportunities to all adult community members.

Fall Term: DEI at LA

Thursday, October 7th: *DEI at LA: A Strategic View* 7-5 p.m.

Join Dan Scheibe, Head of School, and Raquel Majeski, Assistant Head for Equity and Community Life as they discuss LA's strategic diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. The evening will conclude with Meghan Smith, Coordinator of DEI Professional Growth and Practice, who will lead participants in a mindfulness practice.



Thursday, October 14th:
Fireside Chat with Irshad Manji 7-5 p.m.

Irshad Manji, author of *Don't Label Me: An Incredible Conversation for Divided Times*, and 2018 J. William Mees Visiting Scholar, will address the importance of having moral courage, and navigating courageous conversations. The evening will conclude with a Q&A.