

COMMENTARY

After two centuries, the town of Bristol, R.I., reckons with its slave-trading past

For the first time, Bristol citizens will erect a public marker to honor the memory of those oppressed by the town's role in the slave trade

By **Scott MacKay** Updated March 6, 2024, 6:00 a.m.



A group of Bristol, R.I., citizens is erecting a public marker to honor the memory of those oppressed by the town's role in the slave trade. The group, organized as the Bristol Middle Passage Port Marker Project, recently secured Town Council approval for a sculpture in Independence Park on the downtown waterfront. Dr. Bernard K. Freamon, left, a law professor and director of Race and the Foundations of American Law Program at Roger Williams School of Law, is president of the Bristol Middle Passage Port Marker Committee. Artist Spencer Evans, center, is a Rhode Island School of Design professor whose sculpture design was selected. At right, Stephan Brigidi, is chair of the design committee of the port marker project. JULIE BRIGIDI

A stroll down Hope Street in Bristol, R.I., past the stately Greek Revival and Federalist houses, is a lesson in the history of a town known for its devotion to its past, and for a parade billed as America's oldest Independence Day celebration.

This July Fourth, Bristol will celebrate American freedom with the 239th edition of a parade that is this New England community's annual secular rite.

What is rarely mentioned publicly is that this picturesque town was a crucial linchpin in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

For generations, that history has been hidden in plain view. Called downtown Bristol's "crown jewel" in the tourist brochures, Linden Place mansion, now a museum, was built with proceeds from the trade in humans. DeWolf Tavern, a lovely restaurant on the waterfront, served as a distillery and warehouse for slaving.

Now, two centuries after it ended — for the first time in town history — a group of Bristol citizens is erecting a public marker to honor the memory of those oppressed by the town's role in the slave trade. The group, organized as the Bristol Middle Passage Port Marker Project, recently secured Town Council approval for a sculpture in Independence Park on the downtown waterfront, a venue that hosts July Fourth concerts and events, and serves as a place for summer family picnics.



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The project committee has been active for about a decade, and ramped up its lobbying, fundraising and public awareness efforts after the 2020 murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, at the hands of Minneapolis police.

Colonial history is a well-trod path in New England and Rhode Island. Yet, for generations, its slaving history was mentioned — and then barely — only in scholarly circles. That began to change in the 1980s with the publication of Jay Coughtry’s, [“The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade 1790 to 1807,”](#) which revealed that more than 60 percent of African slaves brought to the West Indies, Cuba, and the American South were transported on Rhode Island ships. Even in 2006, when The Providence Journal did a [series on the state’s participation in slaving](#), some historical committees were reluctant to cooperate.

A mordant saying in Rhode Island is that only the state’s most pedigreed families can trace their lineage to a rum runner or slave trader. Among them are the Browns of Providence, for which Brown University is named, and the DeWolfs of Bristol, the town’s leading family during the slave trading era. The DeWolfs were the most successful slave-trading clan in American history, responsible for transporting more than 10,000 Africans to the Americas. When James DeWolf, who had been a US Senator, died in 1837, he was reputed to be the second-richest man in America.

Cracks in the local amnesia of Bristol’s slavery role begin in 2001, when 10 DeWolf descendants decided to confront their family’s history. They invited other relatives, but many were not pleased with this excavation of their family’s past. The 10 family members researched and retraced the family’s Triangle Trade slaving history from Bristol to West Africa to the West Indies and Cuba, where the DeWolfs owned sugar plantations.

The DeWolf ancestors’ trips and research led to the publishing of a 2008 book, [“Inheriting the Trade: A Northern Family Confronts Its Legacy as the Largest slave-trading Dynasty in U.S. History”](#) by [Thomas Norman DeWolf](#), and a film, [“Traces of the Trade,”](#) directed by [Katrina Browne](#), a DeWolf scion.

That effort also led to the formation of the port marker committee, says Stefan Brigidi, a photographer and chairman of the project’s design committee. The committee was rebuffed years back in its attempt to erect a slave marker near a downtown statue honoring military veterans. That slowed but didn’t end their quest.

Bernard K. Freamon, a law professor and director of the Race and Foundations of American Law Program at Roger Williams University Law School, is president of the marker committee. A scholar of slavery, Freamon believes that the sculpture will one day help educate Rhode Islanders

about the horror of slavery in Bristol and other communities, including Providence and Newport. Near the end of the 18th century, Bristol supplanted Newport as the largest slaving center in the state. The DeWolfs were the state's largest slave traders, and some family members ran slaves even after it became illegal in 1807.

Slaving fueled the early economic history of the town and created Bristol's early fortunes, says Freamon, providing jobs for shipbuilders, mast makers, rope makers, coopers who made barrels for rum, distillers, sail makers and farmers who provided food for voyages. The DeWolfs even opened banks to finance slaving and an insurance firm to insure voyages.

Cotton picked by slaves fueled early America's Industrial Revolution, which began in New England's fledgling textile mills.

Africans were not the only humans enslaved in Bristol. A 1774 Rhode Island census showed the town had 114 enslaved Africans and 16 enslaved Indigenous people from the Pokanoket Tribe.



A model of the Bristol Middle Passage Port Marker Project statue, by artist and Rhode Island School of Design professor Spencer Evans. JULIE BRIGIDI

The sculpture picked by the project committee was chosen from three models by Rhode Island artists. The models were on display at the town library for more than a month, so citizens could vote. Citizens supported the one ultimately chosen.

The winner was shaped by Spencer Evans, a RISD professor who lives in Providence. His sculpture depicts a Pokanoket woman and an African man looking out over the water, and a young child facing land. “My concept for the memorial is based on the love and respect for my ancestors who endured the Middle Passage and which resulted in generations of descendants being able to live and thrive on this land today,” Evans told the Bristol Town Council.

Evans said he didn’t want to focus on the pain and trauma of slavery. “There is no room for guilt in this.” As is the case with any piece of art, viewers will make up their own minds, but Evans says he hopes viewers will see “hope, strength, and resilience.”

A Texas native, Evans says he has enjoyed his time getting to know Bristol. He admires the town for supporting this initiative at a time when he says too many places, including his home state and other red states, are whitewashing African American history.

The sculpture will be in bronze and stand about 6 feet tall. It will be placed near the harbor in Independence Park. Evans and Freamon hope that one day schoolchildren will take field trips to see it, and it will serve to educate park visitors to the town's true history.

The cost of the statue will be about \$100,000. No town tax money is involved, so Susan Capone Maloney, head of fundraising for the project, says the committee must raise about \$80,000 to make it a reality. The design still needs approval from state environmental officials and the Coastal Resources Management Council.

While the town council unanimously approved the project, committee members acknowledge that sentiment in the town isn't unanimous. One resident, Peter Hewett, who is retired from the US Navy, told the council he doesn't believe the memorial should be in such a public part of town. "I don't believe Bristol in 2024 has any need for healing or remembrance for what happened."

Hewett suggested any memorial be placed on private property or on the museum lawn at Linden Place.

Hewett suggested any memorial be placed on private property. The Rhode Island Slave History Medallion Organization [placed a medallion at Linden Place](#) museum in 2021.

Halsey Herreshoff has long been a political fixture in Bristol; he is a former town administrator and town council member. Now retired, he's also a DeWolf descendent. He said in a recent interview that he doesn't support public display of a statue to the town's slaving past.

"I didn't have slaves. It was awful but I had nothing to do with it. It was, what, 10 generations ago?" said Herreshoff. "It is true, but why do we have to emphasize it? Why can't we just forget about it? Some of these do-gooders think it's constructive to bring this forward, but I don't. I think it's idiotic."

The sculpture is slated for installation early in 2025. So when the 240th July Fourth parade marches through town next year, visitors will see a sculpture that marks the town's role in the

trans-Atlantic trading of human beings, and Bristol will celebrate Independence Day in all of the town's complications and contradictions. It's a reminder of our collective struggle to achieve the aspirations of the nation's founding as a beacon of freedom in a broken world.

Scott MacKay is a retired reporter who worked at The Providence Journal and The Public's Radio, the Providence NPR affiliate. He lives in Bristol.

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kmc11b

3/06/24 - 8:35AM

“I didn't have slaves. It was awful but I had nothing to do with it. It was, what, 10 generations ago?” said Herreshoff.

Yes you did profit from this slave trade.

EndlessCoffee

3/06/24 - 9:02AM

For real. The humble yacht maker sure likes some history, just not THAT history. His family has a MUSEUM. A legacy. Know what else left a legacy? Slavery. JFC.

<https://herreshoff.org/about/>

sidmcd

3/06/24 - 8:50AM

If one can celebrate heroic deeds that occurred in the past, one should also show remorse for shameful acts.



mikeab00

3/06/24 - 9:47AM

Terrific to see Scott MacKay's byline again. Please sir, I want some more.



ekm22x

3/06/24 - 11:19AM

Bristol's history in the Slave Trade is true and factual: it's HISTORY as much as is the Declaration of Independence. Why do some want it to be buried? Might it be motivated by White Privilege? If you'd like to learn more about our organization, please go to our website: www.BMPPMP.org



C.Kingsfield

3/06/24 - 11:41AM

Some public acknowledgment in Bristol of the slave trade is long overdue. It got to be such a beautiful town from the riches earned by slaving. The two go hand in hand.

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