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What the Market Will Bear

Marking Juneteenth with Observances Both Haunting and Uplifting

While many Lower Manhattan residents know that their community was once the site of a slave market (and that the wall for which Wall Street is named was built partially with the labor of enslaved persons), few have a specific sense of how, or even where, the buying and selling of human beings took place.

That is about to change, thanks to “The Slave Market: Wall Street,” a new augmented reality art piece by sculptor and inventor Marcus Brown, which brings to life a dark chapter of local history. It is now possible to be immersed in the Wall Street slave market by approaching a sign at the corner of Wall and Water Streets, and scanning a QR code. This launches through your phone’s camera a visual overlay that recreates the wooden shack built in December, 1711, for the purpose of offering a unique commodity—merchandise that could walk and speak.

As you move your phone about, the scene shifts with your position and perspective, superimposing on the real-life background ghostly figures of dark-skinned men and women with forlorn expressions—mute sentinels offering a haunting attestation to the human capacity for inhumanity.

“One thing that always bothered me about our narrative of slavery was the lack of visual representations,” says Mr. Brown, who is based in New Orleans. “This is about establishing a human connection. My goal is for the audience to realize that these were real people who were treated as property while they built New York and much of the rest of this country.”

“Very few people realize today that New York was one of the centers of the American slave trade,” he continues. “In the Colonial Era, four out of every ten households in the City held at least one slave. Charleston, South Carolina, was the only place in America that had more.”

“And while everybody knows that New York has always been the financial capital of America,” Mr. Brown adds, “we’ve forgotten that this status was derived largely from its role in financing the business of slavery. Many banking practices that are still with us, like pledging assets as collateral to borrow against, were pioneered by New York banks deeply enmeshed in lending to slave traders.”

Mr. Brown's ultimate aim is to raise funds for more traditional sculptures at the site commemorating the significance of the countless stolen lives that were bargained for at the foot of Wall Street. "My grandmother died recently at 100 years old," he reflects. "She was pretty sure that her grandmother and great-grandmother were enslaved. People need to remember that America is only three grandmothers away from slavery."

Elsewhere in Lower Manhattan, this weekend will see multiple celebrations of Juneteenth, the holiday that marks the anniversary of slavery's end in America, when the practice was finally abolished in Texas in 1865, two years after President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

Trinity Church will mark the occasion with a Saturday celebration in its churchyard (from 9:30am to 11:30am) featuring a picnic, book swap, and interactive read-aloud of Alice Faye Duncan's book, "Opal Lee and What It Means To Be Free." (Ms. Lee, a retired teacher and activist, was one of the leaders of the campaign to have Juneteenth declared a federal holiday, a goal that was achieved in 2021.)

Head to Pier 25 between 12pm and 4pm for Manhattan Youth's Juneteenth celebration. Here, you'll find black-owned local businesses offering food, handmade goods and products, along with live music and games for all ages.

The Battery Park City Authority will host a pair of Juneteenth celebrations tomorrow (Saturday), with the Federation of Black Cowboys sharing history, horsemanship, and riding in Rockefeller Park, from 4pm to 6pm. At 6:30pm in Rockefeller Park, the River to River Festival will conclude with Guinean musician and activist Natu Camara performing her signature blend of afro-rock and soul.

Juneteenth is Monday, June 19. On this day, between 11am and 4pm, the African Burial Ground National Monument at 290 Broadway, between Duane and Reade Streets (the outdoor memorial is around the corner on Duane Street) will commemorate emancipation with libation, drumming, speakers, and performances.

Also on Monday, the World Trade Center will host a Juneteenth concert featuring the self-styled "Master of Sidewalk Funk," the Sammy Buttons Experience on the floor of the Oculus between 1pm and 3pm. For the occasion, the Oculus lights will display the colors red, black and green—the unofficial chroma of Juneteenth, representing the blood, soil and prosperity of the African people.

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