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Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory

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Why that "peculiar institution," slavery, spread and festered in a country built on freedom and how its false depiction as a benevolent system, in which loving masters cared for their hapless servants, became entrenched in American memory, are the themes of this illuminating collection of essays. The editors, (James Horton, the Benjamin Banneker Professor of History at George Washington University, and Lois Horton, professor of History at George Mason University), have collaborated on seven books of African-American history, including, recently, the well-regarded *Slavery and the Making of America*.

The contributors of these eleven essays are among the leading scholars of slavery and public history, such as Ira Berlin, Bruce Levine, David Blight, the editors themselves, and Dwight Pitcaithley, the former Chief Historian of the National Park Service. The book's most notable feature is its unraveling of the inconsistencies between historical slavery and its portrayal at monuments, museums, and parks.

Berlin clears the fog of historical memory by demonstrating that for most of its three hundred years, slavery was a Northern and a Southern institution, and that Jefferson's Declaration of Independence did not include equality for all men, and sadly, not for his own slaves. Lois Horton concludes that although Jefferson's neighbors, George Washington and John Randolph, freed hundreds of their slaves, Jefferson freed only eight—those related to his African-American mistress, Sally Hemings.

Pitcaithley describes the pressure that the National Park Service encountered by the Sons of Confederate Veterans and other revisionists who believed that monuments should do no more than honor the men who fought and should not mention slavery as a cause of the Civil War. Levine exposes the myth perpetuated by "neo-Confederate" groups that claim that large numbers of slaves willingly fought for the South. He reveals that the Southern cause held no appeal for the enslaved: slavery "was, first and foremost, a system of forced labor justified by racial ideology. The average slave's life was therefore one of exhausting labor, extreme poverty, physical punishment [and] personal humiliation."

Other contributions recount controversies of how slavery was portrayed at the Library of Congress, at the Liberty Bell Monument in Philadelphia, in the former Confederate capitol, Richmond, Virginia, and at Brown University.

Together, these essays call for widespread public education at historical sites to remedy the pernicious, and too often incorrectly portrayed, legacy of slavery that continues to distort history. This lively and thought-provoking collection succeeds admirably in its intended purposes as it explores modern racism's bitter roots.
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