

Baylor launches online ‘journey through history’ regarding race

March 3, 2021

On Texas Independence Day, prior to the public release of a report from a commission formed to explore Baylor University’s historic links to slavery and racial injustice, the school held the first of three forums on the subject.

The first of the online “[Baylor Conversation Series: Perspectives on Our History](#)” presentations March 2 focused on slavery in America.

A subsequent discussion on March 9 will examine slavery in Texas and Baptist life, and the final forum on March 16 will look specifically at Baylor’s history and recommendations for moving forward.

Impact of ‘ubiquitous’ slavery lingers

Historians participating in the initial online discussion agreed slavery was “ubiquitous” in the early history of the United States, and its impact continues to the present.

From the time of Columbus until 1820, at least two-thirds of the millions of people who crossed the Atlantic to land in America were African, said panelist Matthew Clavin, history professor at the University of Houston.



Matthew Clavin

“The vast majority of colonists were Africans, and the vast majority of Africans were enslaved peoples” who came to the Americas against their will, Clavin said.

While demand for labor initially made slavery widespread in both the North and South, the lack of a unifying cash crop in the North led to its eventual decline in that area, he noted. In contrast, Eli Whitney’s invention of the cotton gin led to the tremendous growth of slavery in the South.

“The cotton gin not only secured slavery’s future, but also secured its growth and expansion,” Clavin said. “By the 1820s, you have slave plantations in Mexican Texas.”

Black families and communities ‘ripped apart’

The end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade meant expanding cotton-growing plantations in the Deep South—and as far west as Texas—relied on the enslaved people of the upper South as their source for labor, and enslaved Black families were “ripped apart” in the process, said Jim Sidbury, distinguished professor of humanities in the history department at Rice University.



Jim Sidbury

“One of the real landmark accomplishments of anti-slavery in the early American period is the outlawing of the Atlantic slave trade. It is, of course, one of the things that’s always celebrated as one of the accomplishments,” Sidbury said. “What we often lose track of is who actually paid the price... .”

The “deeply rooted communities” of enslaved people in the Upper South “were destroyed as people’s children were sold away from them (and) as people’s spouses were sold away from them,” he said.

Slavery was “embedded” into the economy, religion, political structures and social institutions throughout early American history, said panelist Kate Carté, associate professor of history at Southern Methodist University.

Slavery and American religion



Kate Carté

Religious teaching about the “curse of Ham”—the curse Noah pronounced on Canaan in Genesis 9:24-27—began being used as a justification of enslavement of Africans in the 15th century and continued in the centuries that followed, Carté noted.

As the legal code developed, Christian institutions in concert with the state made it clear an enslaved person’s change in spiritual status—conversion to the Christian faith—did not alter his or her civil status, she said.

“It’s really important to understand that the religious freedom that white people fought for in the era of the American Revolution was understood as not changing the rights of their slaves,” she said. “If religious freedom could change civil status, then including religious freedom in the Constitution would have meant an end to slavery—and that conversation was never on the table.”

By the 19th century, evangelical Christians in the South “disengaged” from moral debates about slavery by defining it as a civic rather than a religious institution—a matter for the state rather than the church, she noted.

Instead, they focused on “missionizing slaves”—exposing them to the Christian gospel—and looked to a literal interpretation of Scriptures that seemed to justify slavery, she added.

Few willing to ‘stick their necks out for Black people’

Abolitionists in the 1800s ranged widely in motivation, Clavin said. Some were racists who wanted to free enslaved Blacks and get them out of the United States, sending them to West Africa, Haiti or Mexico. A small number wanted to see all enslaved people freed and given full and equal rights in the United States immediately.

“There are not a lot of abolitionists in United States history,” Clavin said, refuting the popular idea some hold that their ancestors all “worked on the Underground Railroad and everybody was trying to help free the slaves.”

“Of the American population, very few Americans were willing to stick their necks out for Black people, quite honestly, in the early 19th century and mid-19th century,” he said.

Sidbury pointed out 300 years of institutional slavery in America—followed by another century before the civil rights of Black Americans were obtained—cannot help leaving a deep imprint on society in the United States.

“Slavery is not very far in our past. It is nearly as far in our past as it is deeply rooted in our history. ... These are not problems that any of us created, but they are the problems that all of us should try to address,” he said.

Baylor addresses racism in its history

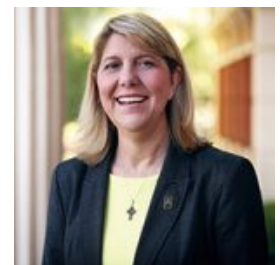
Last summer, Baylor’s board of regents passed a [resolution](#) acknowledging the university’s founders and most of its initial trustees were slaveholders, and many of its early leaders supported the Confederacy.



A large bronze statue of Judge R.E.B. Baylor is located on Founders Mall on the Baylor University campus between Waco Hall and Pat Neff Hall. It was dedicated Feb. 1, 1939. (Baylor University Photo)

Regents created the 26-member [Commission on Historic Campus Representation](#) to review the university's history and offer recommendations on how to present it, including its treatments of on-campus statues, monuments and buildings that recognize individuals linked to racial injustice.

The board [accepted the commission report](#) at its February meeting and will release the full report to the general public later in March, after the three forums.



Linda Livingstone

“The commission’s report tells more than the story of Baylor’s history,” Baylor President Linda Livingstone said. “It is a testament to the importance of telling the truth, of asking for forgiveness, and of reaching out to others impacted by the institution of slavery in fulfillment of our Christian mission and in keeping with our Christian witness.

Livingstone characterized the online discussions as an opportunity for “the Baylor Family to join together in three conversations that follow the same journey through history undertaken by commission members and on which the regents and administration are traveling today.”

“These will be conversations that address difficult subjects—subjects that are painful and about which there are disagreements,” Livingstone said. “However, we are committing ourselves to practicing civil discourse and open dialogue for the sake of reaching a place of mutual understanding and healing.”

The university’s goal in addressing its history—including offering the online discussion—is to “foster an environment of racial equality in which all students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends of Baylor know they are valued and loved throughout the reaches of the Baylor family,” she added.