

Traveling Backwards: Reparations and the Complications of History

Before the Civil War, several of my ancestors in Western Pennsylvania were staunch abolitionists. They participated in the Underground Railroad, helping escaped slaves from the South make the journey to freedom.

During the War itself, several of these same ancestors, fought in that conflict. At least two of them died, along with several hundred thousand other Northern soldiers fighting to bring the South back into the republic and to end slavery. Another relative who served with the North, Uncle Marion McNickle, survived and lived long enough to share his tales of the War with my father in his boyhood.

So, a question: Why should I as a taxpayer pay reparations for an institution my ancestors helped defeat?

In "[Getting Real About Reparations](#)," published in the June issue of [Chronicles Magazine](#), Roger McGrath brilliantly addresses both this subject of reparations and the complexities of history.

The history of American slavery, as McGrath demonstrates, is much more complicated than that presented in so many of our classrooms and textbooks. The Africans who were carried to America, for example, were slaves before they ever touched the deck of a ship, captives forced into servitude by more powerful tribes or Arab traders, and then sold for delivery to the New World. Because of the relatively high cost of purchasing these slaves, planters and developers often employed Irish immigrants for building canals and roads, grueling work that left many of them dead from disease or accident. As McGrath tells us:

Frederick Law Olmstead, the architect of New York's Central Park, traveled throughout the South on the eve of the Civil War and was surprised to find, again and again, that Irishmen were used instead of slaves for the work of draining swampland, felling trees, digging ditches, quarrying rock, and clearing forests because "it was much better to have Irish do it, who cost nothing to the planter if they died, than to use up good field-hands in such severe employment."

Nor were whites the only slave owners. In 1860, nearly 4,000 free blacks living in the South owned some 20,000 slaves. After analyzing this figure, McGrath turns his attention to the black-owned slaves in Louisiana just before the War:

The largest concentration of black slave owners was in Louisiana. Marie Metoyer owned 287 slaves and more than 1,000 acres of land. The widow C. Richards and her son P.C. Richards had 152 slaves working their sugar plantation. Antoine Dubuclet had 100 slaves on his sugar plantation. Cotton planter Auguste Donatto owned 70 slaves, as did Antoine Decuire. Verret Polen owned 69. Dozens of other blacks owned 30 or more slaves.

Various [Native American tribes](#) – the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and others – also approved and practiced the enslavement of blacks. By the beginning of the Civil War, the "Five Civilized Tribes" owned approximately 10,000 slaves. McGrath tells us that when the U.S. government forced the Cherokee west on the Trail of Tears, they took with them several thousand slaves.

Moreover, many Native Americans fought for the South in the War. In Waynesville, North Carolina, for instance, William Thomas led his famous Legion of Cherokees and mountaineers in a skirmish against the Yankees in one of the last battles of the Civil War. Here the Cherokee encircled the Union forces, lit bonfires on the ridges, and intimidated their enemies with

war cries. Learning that the war had ended, the next day the Confederates and Union commanders negotiated a cease-fire and surrender.

As McGrath so aptly demonstrates, the practice of slavery was not limited to whites. Blacks and Native Americans owned slaves. Why? Because the society in which they lived condoned slavery. Like them, we condone and approve certain practices that may one day be condemned by our descendants.

At the end of his article, McGrath writes: "Unfortunately, these complexities and uncomfortable facts of slavery in the United States are unknown to the majority of Americans today. I suspect those now talking about reparations are among them."

McGrath aims his article at those calling for reparations with the intention of demonstrating that the subject is far more convoluted than most Americans know.

Yet "Getting Real About Reparations" serves a broader purpose as well. It is yet another reminder about history and the ways in which we view those who were a part of that history. All too often we critique our ancestors without making any effort to get to know them. Unless we attempt to walk in their shoes, however, and see with their eyes, we have nothing but facts and dates by which to evaluate them. Such ignorance of the past, and worse, judging that past in the courtroom of the present, breeds contempt for those who have gone before us and arrogance in ourselves.

In "[Land Of Hope](#)," historian Wilfred McClay writes: "For the human animal, meaning is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Without it, we perish. Historical consciousness is to civilized society what memory is to individual identity."

We develop historical consciousness by reading writers like McGrath and McClay. That consciousness in turn can act, as does our individual memory, as a tool for making our way in the world.

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