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A History To Be Reckoned With At Faneuil Hall



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How to Reckon with History at Faneuil Hall

On any given summer day, Faneuil Hall is buzzing with tourists, braving the humidity to visit the site known as the “cradle of liberty.” Completed in the 1740s, Faneuil Hall was a meeting place for revolutionaries and abolitionists. But in recent months, many have struggled to square that image with the landmark’s

historic connection to slavery.

“We're standing here, it's a beautiful day,” Steve Locke said when I met him on Merchants' Row, just outside of Faneuil Hall. “You would never know that there was a slave market here.”

Locke – an artist in residence for the City of Boston – wants to change that. He said, there is a contradiction central to this place.

“This is the thing that I think is hard for people,” Locke said. “It is the ‘cradle of liberty.’ Frederick Douglass spoke here, suffragettes spoke here. At the same time, Peter Faneuil was a slaver, and made his money through the trafficking of human beings. Both of those things can be true.”

Locke is proposing a memorial to enslaved Africans and African-Americans that would be a bronze “footprint” of a slave auction block, which people could walk on, stand on, and touch.

“And if they touch it, they'll realize that it's heated to a constant temperature of 98.6 degrees to evoke the presence of a human body,” he said. “So it's a way of marking the spot – metaphorically and physically – where people were transformed from subjects into objects.”

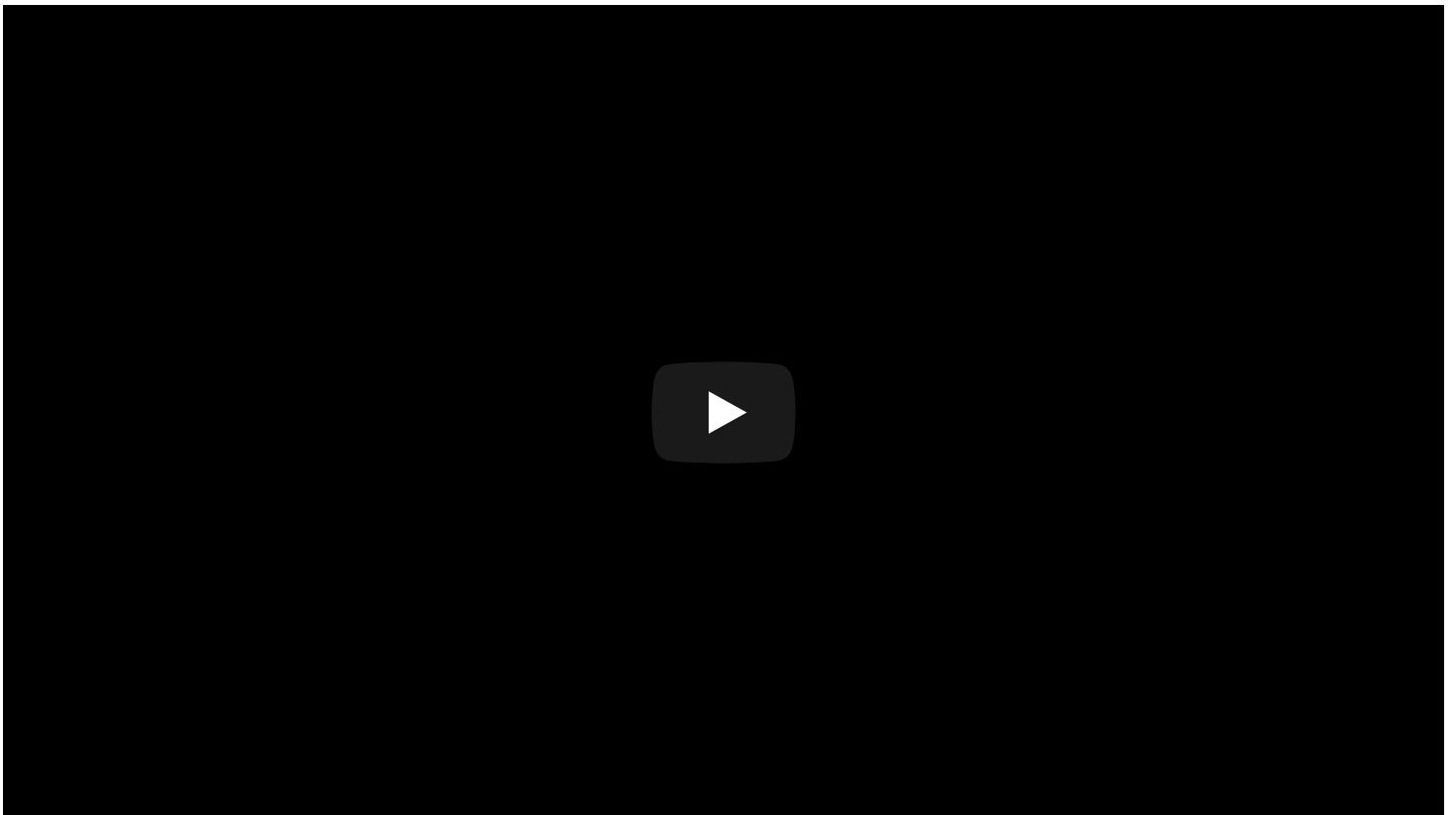
For Kevin Peterson though, a memorial doesn't go far enough. Peterson is the founder of the New Democracy Coalition, a social justice nonprofit group. Since last summer, one of its main causes has been a call for the city to remove the name "Faneuil" from Faneuil Hall.

“We saw it as an opportunity to engage the nation and the city around the issue of race,” Peterson says. His group wants to rename the building for Crispus Attucks, who was killed during the Boston Massacre, just a few blocks from where Faneuil Hall sits.

“He’s the first person to die in the Revolutionary War, he happens to be an African American who was part Native American,” he says.

Peterson has been talking about this to anyone who might listen, writing open letters to city councilors, the Chamber of Commerce, and the mayor.

But so far, the city hasn’t been persuaded. The Mayor told WGBH News that he supports the idea of a public art project – but does not want to consider renaming Faneuil Hall, saying we should “learn from history” rather than trying to “erase it.”



Peterson doesn’t buy that argument.

“As we elevate the name of Crispus Attucks to Sam Adams, or John Hancock, or other luminaries in the city of Boston, we are adding to our sense of history – we’re never erasing history,” he says.

Peter Drummey, a librarian at the Massachusetts Historical Society, showed me

Faneuil's letters, which the historical society has in its collection. Faneuil writes without any remorse about buying and selling people. But when I asked Drummey what he thought should be done with Faneuil Hall, he said it's not up to him.

“History is too important to be left to historians. This is a question that everybody has to participate in. People can have very strong feelings about this that can be supported by evidence,” Drummey says.

Steve Locke, the artist proposing the memorial, says his public art project has nothing to do with the effort to change Faneuil Hall's name. But he does have an opinion. He quotes the poet Solmaz Sharif, who wrote that "it matters what you call a thing. "

“So it matters that it's Faneuil Hall, it matters that he built it, and he built it with the lives of trafficked people,” Locke says. “We really can't let him off the hook for that. If we change the name, we end up letting him off the hook for what he did.”

Locke's project has support from the mayor, and is currently being reviewed for funding.

Meanwhile, Peterson's New Democracy Coalition hasn't gotten a hearing with the Boston City Council about renaming Faneuil Hall, as he's requested.

But whatever happens, these debates have resurfaced a chapter of history that many people in Boston might have forgotten – or never learned in the first place.

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