

EDITORIAL

Faneuil Hall's slave legacy



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AMID CALLS to [boycott Faneuil Hall](#) because its namesake owned slaves, a local artist has a promising idea that could help crack the code for dealing with slavery's legacy in modern Boston. [Steve Locke](#), a 55-year-old artist and teacher at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design and, currently, one of the city's annual [artists in residence](#),

proposes an installation called “[Auction Block Memorial at Faneuil Hall](#) .” The artwork promises to offer a provocative and fruitful engagement with the building’s history and its namesake, Peter Faneuil, who built his fortune, and funded the colonial-era landmark, in part on the slave trade, and was a slave owner himself.

Locke’s proposed installation, now awaiting approval from the city’s Browne Fund, as well as, eventually, the City Council, will include two bronze plates embedded in the brick of the plaza, one representing the auctioneer, the other the people being sold into slavery. A map will illustrate the Triangular Trade route of goods and human chattel. The bronze representing slaves will be heated to a constant 98.6 F in order, says Locke’s proposal, to make “touching the work an intimate and reverent experience as if you are touching a living person.” The work is also instructive in that it shows that, when it comes to public memorials, there are alternatives to statuary.

It’s worth remembering that some of the country’s earliest [slave owners](#) were not rebels trying to destroy the United State of America, but men who founded it: Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, New Englander John Hancock, and merchants like Faneuil.

That makes local history, and how to confront it, complicated. In Brookline, a school is no longer the namesake of [another New England slave owner](#). At Harvard, the family crest of a [slave owner who endowed the college’s first law professorship](#) was removed from the Law School. More recently, [Tom Yawkey’s name was removed](#) from a street bordering Fenway Park.

But for every discussion about erasing the name of a slave owner carved over the door of a school, there is an important counterpoint: the glaring need to educate modern Bostonians about the unvarnished past — and not just with a passive contextual ornament like a historic plaque.

Locke's work is subtle — the “auction block” is not represented by a raised platform, but is embedded at grade in the walkway. Passersby can choose to engage or not, says Locke — much as they do every day in life. But the work's subtitle makes clear its intent: “A Site Dedicated to Those Enslaved Africans and African-Americans Whose Kidnapping and Sale Here Took Place and Whose Labor and Trafficking Through the Triangular Trade Financed the Building of Faneuil Hall.” Locke's work confronts history without erasing it.

Michelle Obama famously said during her time in the White House, “[I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves.](#)” She was speaking literally, but her comment easily applies as a metaphor for the United States, where slavery was long [a cornerstone of the economy](#), undergirding not only Southern agriculture but also, by extension, [the merchant and industrial economy of the North](#). Locke's work has the potential to bring that metaphor home and serve as a model for other creative ways to face our history.