

A memorial for victims of the slave trade is being proposed at Faneuil Hall

"This is a way to identify our shared past and what happened to us."



Faneuil Hall, also known as "the Cradle of Liberty" in Boston. —Charles Krupa / AP Photo

By Christopher Gavin July 19, 2018

It's hard to walk around Boston without discovering tidbits of history memorialized in some fashion, like a plaque on a building or a statue in a park.

But at Faneuil Hall, one of the city's busiest destinations, some history is nonexistent, according to Steve Locke, an artist and MassArt professor.

Mention of Peter Faneuil's — an 18th century merchant and the hall's namesake — business in the slave trade and past as a slaveholder, along with the slave auctions that were once held along Merchants Row, is completely absent at the hall, nicknamed "The Cradle of Liberty."

"It's not unknown to most people ... what the Faneuil family did, but what's weird is when you go down there, there's no record of it," Locke, the artist behind a proposed memorial for victims of the slave trade at the historic site, told Boston.com Tuesday. "There's nothing and that's what seems so egregious to me as a Bostonian."

Locke, one of [the city's artists in residence](#), envisions a monument in the shape of a slave auction block with two rectangles: a small one representing the auctioneer and a larger one representing people sold into slavery.

The bigger piece would include a 10-by-16-foot bronze plate with a map of the Triangular Trade route that shipped African slaves and raw goods across the Atlantic Ocean and built the Faneuil family's wealth.

The plate would be heated to an ever-warm 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit to evoke the human beings that were sold as property, according to Locke, who said he was inspired by a similar installation, "Monument to a Monument" at the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany.

Plans indicate the memorial [would sit at the front of Faneuil Hall](#) — facing Quincy Market — on city property along the Freedom Trail.

Faneuil, who traded slaves, tobacco, produce, fish, molasses, and rum, owned five slaves with the same fortune that was used to build the hall he donated to the city that now bears his name, [according to the National Parks Service](#).

Locke said Boston's history with slavery, racism, and racial inequality is a conversation the city must have.

"We make monuments not for the things that we want to remember, but for the things we need to remember," he said. "This isn't therapeutic. This isn't a sort of feel good kind of thing. This is a way to identify our shared past and what happened to us."

The memorial proposal is being reviewed for funding from the Edward Ingersoll Browne Fund, one of Boston's public arts funding mechanisms.

Mayor Marty Walsh voiced support for the design while speaking on WGBH's "Boston Public Radio" last week and said he hopes the memorial kicks off discussion about the city's history, [the radio station reports](#).

"I think there's an opportunity with the Slave Auction Block Memorial ... to actually tell us what happened at Faneuil Hall, but also tell us what happened after slavery at Faneuil Hall," Walsh said.

"I commend Steve, because he's raising the conversation through art," he added.

The proposal comes following calls in the last few years [to rename Faneuil Hall because of Faneuil's connections to slavery](#).

The New Democracy Coalition, a group that's said the site should instead be named in honor of Crispus Attucks, considered the first person to die in the American Revolution, [petitioned the City Council in June](#) to consider the change.

"I understand how painful that is to have a huge edifice, the 'Cradle of Liberty,' to be named after a slaver," Locke said. "I'm not interested in debating whether the name should be changed. I'm interested in telling the truth about Peter Faneuil and his family."

The region has seen a recent push to acknowledge its connections to slavery, including plaques [installed at Harvard University](#) and [Harvard Law School](#) in memory of slaves who worked there and whose work made the institution's existence possible.

Massachusetts's only Confederate soldier memorial — which once sat on Georges Island — [was removed last year](#).