Still Fighting the Civil War in South Carolina

By Ethan J. Kytle and Blain Roberts

Ethan J. Kytle and Blain Roberts teach in the Department of History at California State University, Fresno. They are writing a book about slavery and public memory in Charleston, South Carolina.

White people living in Charleston created a statue to remember a supporter of slavery John C. Calhoun, who had died in 1850. In 1887, after a thirty-year campaign, they installed a monument to Calhoun in Marion Square, the park at the very heart of the city. The city's black residents could do nothing to prevent the statue of the man who had worked hard to keep them in chains. So for decades they tried to destroy and graffiti the monument. Even after the original statue was replaced by a second, which stood atop an enormous column, it continued to be vandalized.

More recently, many people wanted to create a monument to Denmark Vesey, a free black executed for plotting a slave rebellion in the city in 1822. Black people hoped the Vesey Monument would force the people of Charleston to confront the reality that slaves were unhappy, so much so that they might violently rebel.

Resistance to the monument has been huge. Local whites have refused to accept how important slavery was. Ground on the memorial was finally broken in February 2010, but only after opponents had prevented the statue's placement in Marion Square. The Denmark Vesey Memorial will stand in Hampton Park, far from the Calhoun Monument, far from the city's historic district, far from the eyes of millions of tourists.

Calhoun's monument embodies white Charleston's preferred method of dealing with its slave past: denial. Dedicated to a man who called Southern slavery "a positive good," the monument honors Calhoun. It says nothing about slavery.

Despite the efforts of black Charlestonians and their white allies, slavery has been confined to the margins of the city's public memory.

The nation must attend to the pain of its history and the pain that the denial of that history continues to inflict. For after the band stops playing and the gala ball comes to a close, one fact will remain: Charleston's protracted civil war is our own.