

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.

Monday evening is shaping up to be quite a night in Charleston. Confederate enthusiasts are throwing a grand ball there to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the state's secession from the Union. Hundreds of people, many decked out in hoop skirts and militia uniforms, will drink mint juleps and dance the night away. Jeff Antley, who has organized the Secession Gala, states that the event "has nothing to do with slavery." He proposes that it is a commemoration of South Carolinians who "stood up for their self-government and their rights under law."

But local members of the NAACP disagree, and they've got professional historians on their side: It is an undeniable fact that South Carolinians seceded to protect their right to own slaves. "This is nothing more than a celebration of slavery," observes Lonnie Randolph, president of the state NAACP chapter. He'll lead a downtown march and a candlelight vigil outside the municipal auditorium where the ball is to be held.

Meanwhile, white Charlestonians worked to memorialize slavery's most vocal champion, 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 memorialization of the man who had worked hard to keep them in chains. So for decades they subjected the monument to an informal campaign of ridicule and defacement. Even after the original statue was replaced by a second, which stood atop an enormous column, it continued to be vandalized.

More recently, controversy has swirled around an effort to erect a monument to Denmark Vesey, a free black executed for plotting a slave rebellion in the city in 1822. Local black activists first proposed the tribute in the 1990s so that the city would acknowledge the centrality of slavery to its past. They also hoped the Vesey Monument would force Charlestonians to confront the reality that slaves were unhappy, so much so that they might violently rebel.

Resistance to the monument has been formidable. Local whites have offered the standard litany of excuses about the marginal role, and benign nature, of slavery. 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 likeness, standing just a block away from where revelers will celebrate secession Monday night, 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's commitment to truth, justice, and the Constitution. 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.