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Boston was robbed of a slave monument at Faneuil Hall. Here's what happened.

By Jeneé Osterheldt Globe Columnist, Updated February 28, 2020, 9:20 a.m.

Artist Steve Locke stood in his new home and studio in Brooklyn. His "Auction Block Memorial at Faneuil Hall" met opposition from the NAACP.JENNIFER S. ALTMAN/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

> 'The history of art, whether it's in music or written or what have you, has always been bloody, because dictators and people in office and people who want to control and deceive know exactly the people who will disturb their plans.'
>
> Toni Morrison

In bleak, block letters — white words on a black flag — the message was blunt: "A man was lynched yesterday."

Artist Steve Locke was in Ms. McRae's fourth grade class in Detroit when he first saw that banner and learned about the NAACP. It was 1972 or '73, and she taught him about how they used this flag between 1920 and 1938, how they used the law, and used solidarity to fight for the rights of people of color.

"It was amazing to me," Locke said. "They used the truth."

Locke's mother was a member of the NAACP. His sister is a member of the NAACP. It's America's oldest civil rights organization, founded in 1909, and it has been a constant in his life, and in most Black American lives.

Yet it is the NAACP's Boston branch that would keep Locke from using public art to tell an undeniable truth. And it was the NAACP that introduced him to public art.

That anti-lynching flag was a visual statement, flying high, raising awareness of the brutal injustice against Black people.

A century later, Locke's concept for "Auction Block Memorial at Faneuil Hall" could have harnessed that same declarative power. It would have forced Boston to recognize its role in slavery. This work could have been to Boston what "Rumors of War," the anti-Confederate memorial by Kehinde Wiley, is in Richmond — a corrective, a reckoning, a healing.

But last July, a week before a public hearing on Locke's design, the local NAACP took a stand against his work.

"Auction Block" was meant to live outside of Faneuil Hall, the alleged Cradle of Liberty, named after slave trader Peter Faneuil.

It was meant to carry on Locke's tradition of holding space in Boston. Those truth-telling lessons he learned in fourth grade are his foundation. You see it in his first big museum show at the ICA in 2013, "there is no one left to blame," that explored vulnerability, violence, and masculinity. It was in the tender simplicity of "I Remember Everything You Taught Me Here" banners that flew outside of the Boston Public Library in 2018. He shaded it in the subtle poetry of "Three Deliberate Grays for Freddie (A Memorial for Freddie Gray)" displayed on the facade of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum from June 2018 to January 2019.

And now, we may never see Locke's most important work in Boston. This weekend, he is slated to speak about "Auction Block" at an art convening in Los Angeles. His project continues to spark a flame through the art world.

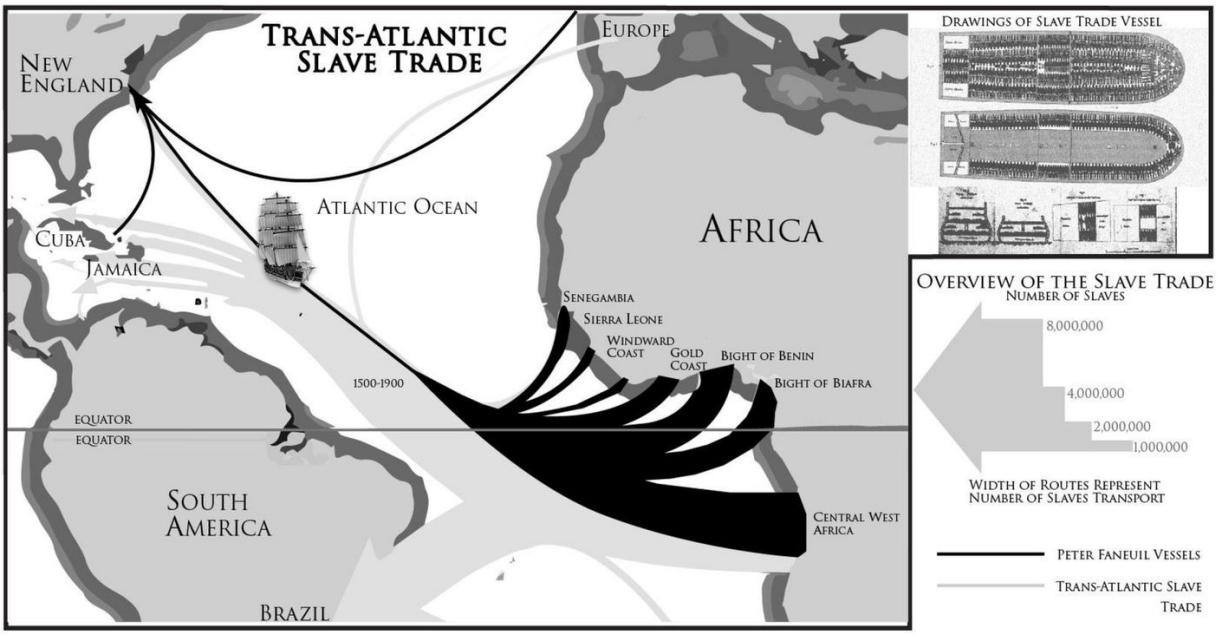
How did we get here?

In 2018, Locke was chosen to take part in Boston AIR, the city's artist-in-residence program. Through the mayor's office of Arts and Culture, AIR allows artists to use art and media to bolster city initiatives. The city doesn't assign projects. But there are motifs.

During Locke's residency, the theme examined city policies through the lens of resilience and racial equity. His research on slavery and New England led him to propose "Auction Block Memorial at Faneuil Hall: 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."

The bronze plate was meant to be set into the ground, street level, a truth to stand on. It was meant to be 10-by-16 feet and heated to a steady 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. Inspired by Horst Hoheisel's "A Memorial to a Memorial" in Buchenwald, Germany, which is also heated to body temperature to remind people of the victims of the Nazi concentration camp, Locke aimed to keep alive the memories of enslaved people here in Boston.

The plate was to contain a map of the Triangular Trade route, the path to wealth of the Faneuil family and other Bostonians. Humans were sold on Merchant's Row. Peter Faneuil was a slave holder and a human trafficker. We could change the name of the Hall. Or we could move right on. But what Locke wanted was a marker, an acknowledgment of what happened here.



A rendering for Steve Locke's "Auction Block Memorial at Faneuil Hall."STEVE LOCKE

Mayor Marty Walsh supported his project. AIR loved the idea. The city contributed $150,000 from its arts fund to it. Locke raised just over $48,000 through Kickstarter.

"I thought Steve's proposal was thoughtful and an important telling of a history that must have more visibility," Walsh told the Globe last July. "I was hopeful that a public process would have allowed Steve to provide that context."

There was some opposition, too. The nonprofit New Democracy Coalition, in a longstanding quest to change the name of Faneuil Hall, showed disfavor from the start. They claimed it was a way for the mayor to thwart renaming efforts.

But the most powerful voice against Locke's work came, surprisingly, from the local chapter of the NAACP. No one from the chapter met with the artist to ask about his work. Instead, he got an e-mail.

"I want to be clear that the work we do every day through the NAACP Boston Branch is centered on uplifting and advancing communities of color, with a focus on the Black community in the city of Boston," Tanisha Sullivan, Boston NAACP president, wrote to Locke. "It is for that

reason that we object to the installation of a slave auction block memorial in front of Faneuil Hall and have made these objections known."

Sullivan told me they didn't stand against Locke's work. They objected to the process.

"There was never a public space," she said. "For any type of memorial that proposes to bring about hope and reconciliation as it relates to race and the racial trauma, I think the Black community is owed the respect of having the opportunity to weigh in. That's not about the NAACP. That is about the community as a whole."

Locke never wanted to avoid a public process.

In fact, Karin Goodfellow, director of the Boston Art Commission and Boston AIR, said Locke pushed for such a process. In December, the city changed their policies and refined the public art process, in part because of recommendations from Locke.

Goodfellow said Locke was pushing for progress and the public hearing was meant to facilitate a civic conversation.

But Locke knew putting his work between the NAACP and the city was going to turn into a war that would only distract from the work. And who really wants to fight with the NAACP?

So he withdrew.

He'd already accepted a job at the Pratt Institute and was in the middle of a move to New York. But the whole ordeal sent him packing sooner, leaving the city he called home, the place he built his art career. I didn't blame him.

Steve Locke at his Brooklyn home and studio, where he displays works from his "there is no one left to blame" series.JENNIFER S. ALTMAN/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Sullivan believes Locke should have showed up to the public hearing despite the NAACP's disapproval.

"Steve was wrong and he should have allowed the process to play out," she said. The community engagement might have been powerful, but "that was lost when Steve decided he was going to take his project away."

But how can you stand against a work without having fully learned about it from the artist? Locke wasn't introducing his work as the absolute solution. It was one piece of the puzzling path to reconciling our racist past and present. And there's a difference between being an advocate for the Black community, as the NAACP vitally is, and policing it.

Despite assumptions, the project isn't dead.

In December, Kickstarter held its annual Miami Art Week dinner. The chosen artist: Steve Locke. Artists, curators, and lovers of the work from all over the country were talking about where the work might go instead of Boston. That's right. The Boston plate, "Auction Block Memorial at Faneuil Hall," could be re-conceptualized as an auction block for Rhode Island, Virginia, or even New York.

Patton Hindle, Kickstarter's head of arts, said as she speaks on panels across the country, Locke's work comes up often. Despite the roadblock he faced in Boston, people stand by his work.

When Locke announced his withdrawal, there were seven days left in his Kickstarter campaign. Only three people canceled their donations. He raised an extra $2,000. His initial goal was $30,000. He raised over $48,000.

"He was able to show us," Hindle said, "if you are able to transparently communicate with an audience, people will support you."

"I think there is nothing worse than a secret that everybody knows," Locke told me in Miami. "We talk a lot about abolition in Boston and that's true, a lot of white people died for freedom. But there's another part of the narrative. Some people were complicit. This whole notion of denial or pretending it didn't happen? It's crazy and it's driven the country crazy.

"The thing about making objects in a physical space, is that they become undeniable. History and research and truth and thinking can be embedded and embodied by object. I believe that. As an artist, I'm trying to help to heal, not create controversy or stir people up. Let's just tell the truth. The truth is what's going to make people free, not just Black people, but all people."

And where we tell that truth matters. When I saw Kehinde Wiley's "Rumors of War" in Times Square last November, it was a stunner. The monument is 27 feet tall and 16 feet wide, a Black man in a hoodie and a pair of Nikes, his locs pulled up on top of his head. He sits regally on a rearing stallion.

In Times Square, he was beautiful, but also a spectacle. People sang Christmas carols on top of him. The wild beauty of Times Square frolicked all around him. It was a gorgeous kind of party all of the time.

In December, he was moved to the front of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, in Richmond, his forever home. He boldly faces the United Daughters of the Confederacy. He's on Arthur Ashe Boulevard, not far from a monument of Stonewall Jackson.

Kehinde Wiley's "Rumors of War" is displayed at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, not far from a monument of Stonewall Jackson..STEVE HELBER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Not only is it where he stands that matters, it is who he is not. He is not Martin Luther King Jr. on a horse. We know portraiture and this type of imaging is about power, which makes it vital that Wiley chose a Black man in hoodie and kicks. Some may call him ratchet. We call him regal. He could be any Black man, yet this monument demands we see his humanity and celebrate him as we celebrate American heroes.

"People think equity is about having the same thing white people have," Locke said. "They think here's a heroic bronze statue of John F. Kennedy, we should make an exact bronze statue of Malcolm X or Toussaint Louverture, and we can do that, but Black people have all sorts of ways of honoring people and marking space as sacred."

Sometimes it's a song or a dance. Sometimes it's as simple as a graffiti tag, a T-shirt, or pouring out a little liquor for the loved ones no longer here. Sometimes that involves imagining certain

figures traditionally or in murals. Other times it is abstract, like Hank Willis Thomas and MASS Design Group's forthcoming Coretta Scott King and Martin Luther King memorial, "The Embrace," meant to stand on Boston Common.

A rendering for Hank Willis Thomas and MASS Design Group's memorial to Coretta Scott King and Martin Luther King. "The Embrace" is meant to stand on Boston Common.HANK WILLIS THOMAS

There is no one way to publicly honor our history.

Thomas was one of the many artists at Locke's dinner in Miami, and cofounder of the For Freedoms Congress convention where Locke is speaking this weekend.

"I think art in the public space shapes the notion of what is important in the world," Thomas said. "Steve is really good at disrupting narratives. I think he was trying to get us to understand the complexity of American history and acknowledge some of the things that are invisible and have taken on different meaning in the 21st century."

The Boston NAACP supports the work Thomas is doing on his upcoming memorial. Yet they opposed Locke's.

For Locke, the ordeal over “Auction Block” has been heartbreaking. He chokes up as he talks about the NAACP’s rejection.

“I think Boston is a really hard city to be Black in because America is a hard country to be Black in,” he said. “I don’t harbor any ill will towards anyone. I do wish they would have talked to me instead of saying my work went against the mission of an organization that my family has been a part of since reconstruction. That’s the hardest part.”

But Locke still loves the city he lived in for some 30 years. He misses the chowder and Legal Sea Foods. His work could go elsewhere. He could do new research to localize the project. But he isn’t over Boston.

“I would love for it to be in Boston, I built it for the city I love for people to heal,” he said. “If you take the citizen oath at Faneuil Hall, you would be stepping out onto our shared history. ... It is because of the labor of people like me, Black people, Faneuil Hall is possible. I’m part of the American story, too.”

What he won’t take part in is a fight to see it come to fruition.

“It is not up to me anymore,” Locke said. "The NAACP made a decision. The people have to make a decision. If they want me to do the project, I am happy to but my heart is not going to be broken again.”

Goodfellow said the Mayor’s Office of Arts and Culture still supports “Auction Block.”

Despite the Boston NAACP’s previous opposition, Sullivan said she would support a project like Locke’s with a public process.

“The idea of a slave auction block memorial is incredibly powerful,” she said. “I do believe, there was an opportunity to have potentially a very deep transformative conversation in this city. Art can play a very significant role when we talk about racial justice and really dismantling systemic racism, not just in Boston but in this country.”

If that is their belief, then it’s imperative to have a face-to-face conversation with the artist and AIR.

The NAACP is coming to Boston this summer for its 111th annual convention. If there was a time to show their support for such a project and host the kinds of conversations they want to see around it, it would be now.

Public art is for the people. And yes, it is political, in so many ways. But the power must always be in the people.

So when we see “Rumors of War,” we see regality in ourselves. When we finally see “The Embrace,” we will see the power of love. If we ever see “Auction Block Memorial at Faneuil Hall,” we will see our history and our truth.

Without art, we never have a complete picture.