Contributions of African Americans Often Have Been Minimized or Overlooked in U.S. History — Including in the Observance of Memorial Day

By Kristen Farrington and Sabrina Dent

As noted by Yale University professor and scholar David W. Blight, the first Memorial Day, known as “First Decoration Day,” was observed May 1, 1865 by formerly enslaved Africans to honor 257 Union soldiers buried in a mass grave at a Confederate camp in Charleston, S.C.

A parade was held, led by more than 2,000 Black children carrying flowers to honor the fallen. The commemoration included proper burial of the soldiers by the freed men. This moment, and the actions of these formerly enslaved men, would affirm the significance of human dignity despite the presence and practice of inequality in America.

Fifty-seven years later, on Memorial Day (May 30, 1922), thousands gathered on Washington’s National Mall for the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial and heard the passionate words of speaker Robert Moton: “With malice towards none, with charity towards all we dedicate our posterity, with you and yours, to finish the work which he so nobly began, to make America an example for all the world of equal justice and equal opportunity for all.”

Moton, a distinguished African-American educator, author and principal of the Tuskegee Institute, was invited to give the keynote address and yet was barred from sitting with white speakers. Can you imagine being asked to speak about equality, about the nation’s aspirations, then experiencing the humiliation of being segregated? Many believe the Lincoln Memorial was built to help heal a country torn apart by the Civil War — 154 years later, can we say we’ve healed? Has equal protection under the law resulted in all Americans experiencing equality and freedom?

In 1976, President Gerald Ford officially recognized Black History Month. Ever since, February has been a time when most Americans are intentional about learning more about the history, culture and heritage of African Americans. It’s a time of reflection and celebration that reminds us how far our country has come since the enslavement of Africans, Jim Crow, Reconstruction and the Civil Rights era. It is an opportunity to recommit ourselves to the dream of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and many other leaders who imagined a better world for generations to come.

The unfortunate reality is people of color continue to experience bigotry, discrimination, racism and socio-political and economic inequities. Feb. 1, 2019 would prove this to be true when Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam found himself in the midst of a scandal for his admitted (then denied) wearing of blackface. The pain of this moment was more than a superficial blemish in the news, but rather revelation of Virginia’s deeply rooted racist past that continues haunting African Americans 400 years after the arrival of their enslaved ancestors. Northam’s actions took place during his time as a student at Eastern Virginia Medical College in 1984. He was elected governor in 2017 by more than 87 percent of African-American voters [according to Vox](https://www.vox.com/2019/2/4/18210420/ralph-northam-racist-yearbook-black-voters-resign).

The [Religious Freedom Center](https://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org/) (RFC)’s mission is to educate the public about the history and significance of religious freedom in America. The Center is very aware that depending on race, ethnicity, socio-economic status and religion, perceptions of religious freedom in America vary.

Through new research and scholarship, we are committed to raising the volume on narratives of religious minorities and under-represented Americans. We are intentionally creating spaces where stories can be heard, difficult conversations can happen and new relationships can grow.

After the Gov. Northam news broke, the RFC hosted a Dialogue on Race with members of Commonwealth Baptist Church, a predominately white congregation in Alexandria, Va., committed to understanding race relations using the tools and skills of civil dialogue. The RFC has hosted many dialogue sessions, but this particular session was challenging for both of us.  
  
Our thoughts included, “I was exhausted and angry after the events of the weekend and tired of talking about race to white people, but I knew this was not the moment to shut down” and “I wanted to co-facilitate the dialogue, but in that moment didn’t know how to help lead the session without adding more pain to an already difficult situation. I wondered, ‘What is my role? Can I speak to this? What is the best way to be an ally?’”   
  
In a tearful moment before the session, we — who have been engaging in dialogue as women, friends, colleagues, religious leaders and allies for years — needed to figure how to navigate the day together.

This was a teachable moment for Black people and our allies to speak up about injustices, microaggressions and other nuisances that challenge the everyday existence and human dignity of people of color. It was time to practice our dialogue skills with one another and our invited guests — to be authentic, to talk about pain, to share personal stories, to learn from one another. This was not easy, but real dialogue never is. The dialogue session that day was very powerful, but it was clear we only touched the tip of the iceberg.

Legislation, memorials and days of recognition have been significant milestones in the healing of our nation. But nothing replaces the deeper personal work of examining unconscious bias, prejudice, privilege and power and reflecting on how we continue to support systemic racism and injustice at all levels of society.

Memorial Day is a somber one as we remember those who have sacrificed so each of us may experience our constitutional freedoms. Before we move too quickly into summer, on May 30, the traditional Memorial Day, let us honor Robert Moton’s prophetic words and recommit ourselves “to make America an example for all the world of equal justice and equal opportunity for all.”