

History in Focus

S2 E3 Monuments and Public History

Wednesday, November 1, 2023

Daniel Story

Before we get started, I want to let you know about an intriguing submission opportunity. AHR History Unclassified consulting editors Kate Brown, and Emily Calicci are editing an upcoming special issue titled "The Mistakes I Have Made" and the call for proposals is open right now. As historians, we're trained to work carefully to avoid mistakes while at the same time working to expose the errors of others. Perhaps it's not surprising that we rarely reflect publicly on our own errors and slip-ups. But what gets lost when mistakes are seen as something to be hidden or glossed over? Is it possible, this special issue asks, to instead dwell in error as a mode of inquiry? With that provocative idea in mind, AHR invites historians to reflect on their missteps and how those missteps reveal insights into historical practice. We welcome stories that explore mistakes you've made, where they've taken you, and what you have made of them. And because this will be a digital-only issue, we invite proposals in a wide variety of textual, digital, and visual forms. And of course, we envision this issue offering space for historical work spanning all time periods and geographic spaces. The deadline to submit is fast approaching, it's December 15, 2023, and proposals should be no more than 500 words. To learn more visit historians.org/ahr-special-issue, you can submit proposals there too—that's historians.org/ahr-special-issue. And again, the submission deadline is December 15, 2023. We really hope to hear from you.

Matt Hermane

Hi, I'm Matt Hermane. And you're listening to *History in Focus*, a podcast by the *American Historical Review*. This is episode 2.3 for November 2023. Today, we take a look at monuments and public art as forms of commemorating and critiquing history, which is the topic explored in a forum titled "Misonumentalizing and Decolonizing: Public History as History for the Public" in the September installments of the American Historical Review's History Lab. From public statues to art installations to street names, participants in the forum discuss how monuments and public art might critique prevailing historical narratives and expose untold narratives. The forum is introduced by Durba Ghosh and includes essays by Jayanta Sengupta, Mathura Umachandran, Arielle Alterwaite, Tawny Paul, and Thomas Adams and Sue Mobley. I spoke with Durba Ghosh, whose research and teaching in the Department of History at Cornell University focuses on British colonialism on the Indian subcontinent. In the second part

of the episode, we hear from Daniel Story, who catches up with Sue Mobley and Thomas Adams on the recent effort to rename streets in New Orleans. But first here's my conversation with Durba Ghosh:

You write the introduction for the forum, you opened up by talking about the death of Queen Elizabeth the Second, but I suspect there's also this origin story for the form that goes back to the summer of 2020. So I was wondering if you could just tell us a little bit about where the idea for the form came from.

Durba Ghosh

Sure. The forum did come together really in 2020. And in particular, thinking about the place of public art, especially public commission, and their role in telling a historical narrative. Also, in 2020, in the aftermath of George Floyd, we were all locked up in the pandemic, there were a number of webinars that were kind of available to the whole world. And so one of them I heard Jayanta Sengupta—who was until January, the curator of the Victoria Memorial Hall in Kolkata, India—and he presented with his colleague Jennifer Howes, what had happened at the Victoria Memorial Hall. The central government had installed an exhibit to Subhas Chandra Bose, and they felt that the colonial statues that are at the center of the Victoria Memorial Hall weren't consistent with the theme of anti-colonialism. And so they asked that the statues be covered in glass boxes, they're mirror so when you look down the sight lines of the building you see your reflection, you don't know that there's a statue there. So by the time I wrote it, the queen had just died and I think probably for those of us in the US, we are watching kind of 24/7 wall-to-wall coverage of the funeral and funeral procession...

Sky News coverage of Queen Elizabeth's funeral procession

In just one minute, the procession that will take Queen Elizabeth the Second on her last journey for her final act of duty, to lie in state for the nation will begin.

Durba Ghosh

What was quite striking to me was how visible all of these monuments were in their broadcasting of the queen's funeral. The thing I'll say about the forum is it's a good moment to put together how public art, and in particular museums and public art in the shape of street naming, is coming together in this particular moment to give the public a history. How public is this history? that of course, is something that a lot of us are grappling with. The essays really direct us to thinking about public history as an opportunity for public engagement, which I hope is the way of the future, I hope it's the way that we start to think of public history as a

form of debate, right as a form of engagement, rather than shying from the controversies that they have generated.

Matt Hermane

The really great thing about this forum is that you have this very diverse set of contributors. You have a curator, you have scholars, you also have these kind of urban activists. Mismonuments is of course something that Umachandran talks about right that Kara Walker piece in the Tate Modern, I was wondering if you could talk about the idea of mismonumentality. What do we mean by that? Exactly?

Durba Ghosh

I think this was a way of her thinking about how an existing form which is the Thomas Brock Victoria Memorial that showed up repeatedly when Queen Elizabeth died, how that monument is tweaked in the Kara Walker, right?

Kara Walker in Tate promotion video for *Fons Americanus*

This is a piece about oceans and seas, traversed fatally. The *Fons Americanus* is an allegory of the Black Atlantic, and really all global waters, which disastrously connect Africa to America, Europe, and economic prosperity.

Durba Ghosh

And it's obviously taking this inspiration of this massive structure that's in front of Buckingham Palace, and mismonumentalizing it, in an effort to decolonize it. And of course, it plays with the idea of the spectacle. At the center of the monument is this figure, who has water spouting out of her neck, out of her jugular, and then out of her breasts so it's really desacralizing the body that's at the heart of the monument that's in front of the palace. So I think Walker is playing with the idea that to destabilize it or to decolonize it, you have to really play with it. In the "Fons Americanus", this is something you think you've seen, but it's not the thing you've seen, right? The installation was different figures that would have come in off of ships. The image that I think opens the essay, or I hope it opens the essay is of the Venus shell, which a lot of people say are supposed to remind you of the body Botticelli Venus image. And so there again, Kara Walker is playing with a kind of canonic artistic sensibility and mismonumentalizing it. She's both asserting that she knows what the original looks like and she's going to play with it to get viewers to think about the legacies of transatlantic slavery in the UK. The theme of the essays are decolonizing, but also thinking about the transnational importance of slavery, that slavery is not limited to one country or one nation, but that it's part of a kind of transatlantic trade, and I think the Kara Walker does that, but also the final essay by Arielle Alterwaite does

that. It's about an exhibit in Frankfurt's Städel Museum, it talks about an exhibit by Cameron Rowland, and it basically uses a series of documents and objects to showcase Germany's relationship to the slave economy. In particular, that Germans were major investors in the slave economy. And so, that's consistent with what I think Kara Walker is doing. I see them both saying slavery is not just an American problem, slavery, racism belongs more broadly to a global economy and that we should be thinking about it in those terms.

Matt Hermans

It's interesting because we have these very eye-catching monuments, things that, like you said, force the viewer to look and think about them. But then when we think about the Sengupta piece, there's this much more subtle form of decolonization. There is not the creation of something, but instead the covering of something. He calls this masking or non-curatorial intervention.

Durba Ghosh

Yeah, the statues that we're talking about in the Victoria Memorial Hall are all of European figures. There's one of Robert Clive, one of the original colonizers of Bengal. There's a Clive statue in London that after George Floyd died, people demanded was taken down.

Sky News coverage of statues debates in the UK

The statues of men who made their fortunes from the slave trade and built the British Empire can be seen all over the country. Not least in London, where its mayor has announced an urgent review of all landmarks, and the protests could be coming here to Whitehall, with calls for this statue of Robert Clive to be removed. He played a key role in establishing Britain's colonial domination over India.

Durba Ghosh

That Clive statue is a replica of the Clive statue that's in Kolkata. They're both commissioned against the advice of the colonial government because they know it's going to be controversial. I think what's interesting about the masking was that it was called for by the central ministry in India and the government of India is currently run by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has been credited with a pogrom against Muslims in 2002, as Chief Minister of Gujarat. What's interesting in the central government taking over to install this exhibit of Subhas Chandra Bose was that it was animated by an anti-colonial spirit, which I think a lot of us can sign on for. The complicating thing is, this is a very well-known ultranationalist government. There was a sense that this colonial past was being covered by some. It's not clear to me how much Lord Clive matters to you when you encounter him in Victoria Memorial Hall, or whether it makes a

difference if there is a glass box when you encounter it. When I was there, what was fascinating, is there are these four glass boxes that are encasing these colonial statues and most people use it as a kind of Instagram opportunity, right? Because you could stand in front of the mirror and see yourself reflected and take a picture. And then because of the way those statues line up in the building, it's like mirrors behind you. So it has this kind of echo effect, and I would say that was the main use of the glass boxes. Maybe that's decolonial like maybe that's decolonized enough. I mean, who's to say I don't really know.

Matt Hermane

I want to move on to Tawny Paul's case study of the renaming of Santa Barbara Avenue in Los Angeles to Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, which is maybe a more democratic form—more grassroots. She talks about the fungibility and publicness of renaming streets. So can you maybe talk a little bit about what she means by fungibility and also kind of the public nature of renaming streets?

Durba Ghosh

Yeah, I think one of the things that's true about historical monuments like statues, and also street names is that if you live on Martin Luther King Drive, you forget what Martin Luther King represented, right? Because you say it all the time. Right?

Matt Hermane

Right. That's something that's really interesting about those pieces or street signs in general, is they're such a mundane thing in comparison to these other things that we've been talking about?

Durba Ghosh

And they're so every day, right? It's hard to measure what impact they have on our daily lives, on our you know, sense of who we are, and our sense of attachment to the spaces. Street names, of course, are fungible, as she says they're changeable in ways that are distinct, possibly from statutes. Since 2020, certainly, but even before that, we've seen a lot of opposition to removing statues or historical markers, basically, with the argument that they're so big, they were meant to be permanent—street names have a kind of different import. I think what's really interesting about this article is that the defense of Santa Barbara Ave, it turns out is a defense not based on any historical reason, but just that it was named Santa Barbara Avenue. And then I think the other thing that's really interesting is how many Martin Luther King drives roads, streets there are in the country. I think Tawny Paul sort of says at some point in the essay, that many of the Martin Luther King Drives are in areas that are extremely

impoverished. So I think it really highlights the contradiction of naming a street Martin Luther King Road or Drive or Avenue, and then allowing that area to remain impoverished. She also talks a lot about the different constituents who participate in the debates and how they make certain claims based on you know, how long they've lived there, what their relationship to this area is, and some, you know, make claims, even though they don't live there—and how it becomes a kind of civic dispute that is about how places make for particular forms of identity. I think that's a very important link that we should be thinking about as we think about how history is commemorated in our daily lives. One thing I'll just say about Tawny Paul's essay, which I find very moving, is that the people that are the actors in the essay, really believe the history that they say in these council meetings, and I never know what to do with that, right? Like if you believe this is your history, how are we as “professional” or “academic” historians intended to engage with that belief, even if it doesn't correspond to something that we think is historically true?

Matt Hermane

Absolutely, and this is a process that we get to see play out in great detail in the Thomas Adams and Sue Mobley piece on changing dozens of street names in New Orleans. And you're right on one hand, it's great because you get to see people participating in this process of actually commemorating their own history, but at the same time, it's a very, very complicated process. And how is the historian supposed to engage with people who aren't necessarily open to having that history critiqued?

Durba Ghosh

As historians, the work we do typically doesn't involve engaging with levers of political power, even though history can easily be politicized, right? The historian as a kind of consultant to street naming is a different kind of job than most of us do in academic institutions, right? Whether we're teaching in high schools or community colleges or four-year colleges, right, the history that we teach students, the history that we engage in is quite distinct from how it's mobilized when organizations, governments, have to make decisions about things like street names, right?

Matt Hermane

You say: "In spaces such as museums, that were once meant to educate an uninformed public that was being cultivated, and in urban spaces where much of the public resides and traverses, how we represent history involves a significant public engagement and self-reflection." So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how we should think of museums and what they are to do today.

Durba Ghosh

I think that art museum, from the very local to the very well known, are trying to bring in publics that are more diverse. And in order to do that they are showcasing art that I think is made by a much bigger range of artists, but they're also showcasing art that touches on issues that might be of relevance to a more diverse population. Museums are taking it upon themselves to showcase art that provokes viewers to think of some of these issues, rather than thinks, oh, we have to educate you in the canon. And so the role of museums now has really shifted toward provoking questions, maybe offering critique. I don't know if I make it clear in the essay, but I think some of the older art, especially the art that appears in the Victoria Memorial, the statues, those are monuments that are not meant to provoke questions, but rather stabilize a certain vision of history, the impulse of the Kara Walker, or Cameron Rowland is very, very different. They're not meant to close down these historical debates and questions, they're actually meant to open it up. There's so many of these exhibits now out there that are being commissioned, that are being assembled, that are destabilizing the cannon, that we, you know, we thought we needed to have. You know, this twinning of George Floyd and the pandemic allowed a lot of museums to rethink how they display what they have. And so the sequence, the historical sequence, which museum curators and historians really like—we like doing things 18th century, 19th century, 20th century—has been, I think, productively disrupted. And I think in that sense, a lot of museums and artists are thinking of this post-George Floyd moment as a kind of important inflection point, and a way to return to some of the debates that I think a lot of people think are behind us, but are in fact, very much part of our current.

Matt Hermane

I think that's a perfect point for us to end on. Thank you so much for doing this.

Durba Ghosh

Thanks so much.

Matt Hermane

That was Durba Ghosh on the forum she introduces in the September issue of the AHR titled "Misonumentalizing and Decolonizing: Public History as History for the Public." Up next, Daniel Story talks with two contributors to that forum, Sue Mobley and Thomas Adams, about their involvement in recent efforts to rename streets, parks and monuments in the city of New Orleans.

Sue Mobley

What we and who we honor in public models, what we value as a society. If we want communities that show respect for all types of people, and all types of talents, and all types of contributions, we have not laid that out. Our streets and our parks, our monuments are honoring people who made war and owned other humans. We don't honor school teachers and nurses or garbage men or grandmothers and we could, that's a choice.

Thomas Adams

At the more kind of historical build level, right, the extent to which our kind of public culture of naming reflects a version of historical writing that is not in keeping with the mainstream of the profession, really since the late 1950s, in terms of where we see causation, where we see agency, where we see power, and where we see the kind of fulcrums of historical change. And that means that we as a profession haven't done a good job of communicating. And so an opportunity like this renaming, where you can try to kind of catch up to some degree our public culture to what we as scholars have been doing for generations of scholarship.

Daniel Story (narration)

I first spoke with Sue and Thomas back in January of 2022, we had intended to meet in person in New Orleans during the AHA conference that year, but pandemic events dictated otherwise, so we ended up chatting a few weeks later on Zoom.

Daniel Story

So thanks very much for doing this zoom with me, and apologies again, that we couldn't connect on the streets of New Orleans as it was our original plan...

Daniel Story (narration)

Sue and Thomas had both been active in municipal efforts around planning, public memory and the like and I knew that they were involved with street renaming in New Orleans. But at that point, I didn't quite know how or to what degree so I started there.

Sue Mobley

There was a point in like, April of 2020, where I was on a phone call. And I started getting a bunch of texts. And I ignored them because a phone call was really important. And then got off and realized that Kristin Gisleson Palmer had been texting me from the podium, during a city council meeting, in which she had, because I didn't respond fast enough, voluntold everyone that I would be working to design a process for renaming streets in the city. Which is where I

got tagged in with a "could we start by writing an ordinance?" And since that's usually when I call Thomas, I called Thomas.

Thomas Adams

Yeah. And that's when I came in to the process, which was at that point I wanna say June 2020, by the time we get to the ordinance.

Daniel Story (narration)

The ordinance they helped craft did two things. One was it set out criteria for how streets, monuments, or parks would be considered for inclusion in the renaming process. And they took a particularly focused approach here, if for no other reason, then if they cast the net too widely, they could be renaming well over 100 streets in the city.

Thomas Adams

You know, you look at the streets of New Orleans, and if you dig a little past, the obvious ones, the number of streets in the city name for say slaveholders, probably is well over 100, right? And if the street is named for a person in a city, that's not literally a saint—like not literally St. Louis, St. John's, something like that, and probably some of them too, frankly—chances are that that person owned property and human beings. In terms of thinking about best practices, but also in terms of the politics of it, what you might even call the kind of prosecutorial aspect of this, right? It both cuts down the number, made it more doable, and it seemed both kind of more strategic to think in terms of not necessarily slave ownership, and certainly not something as both useful, but also is somewhat kind of fuzzy at times as something like white supremacy, and think in terms of in particular treason, and think in terms of kind of direct violations of the Constitution itself. We crafted an ordinance that, again, was very much about demonstrable, did you make war on the United States? Did you take specific and kind of demonstrable actions to deny constitutional rights to other Americans at points after the war? And did you attempt to overthrow governments after the war? As happened here in 1866, and 1874.

Daniel Story (narration)

So those were the renaming criteria. The other thing that the ordinance did was establish a commission whose job it would be to conduct research, engage the public, and make renaming recommendations that the city council would ultimately consider.

Thomas Adams

Each council member got to appoint a commissioner, which should come from their districts, the mayor would appoint one, the two at-large council members would appoint one of the City Planning Commission would appoint one. We had hoped, and the language was very clear in the actual ordinance that this commission would be made up of a group of people who have expertise in the history of the city informally, formally, but in one way or another. And that was in some ways to thing we were kind of excited about and Sue and I had gone so far as to begin canvassing various scholars around the city and making sure we knew their council districts and trying to imagine a broad, diverse set of expertises that would fit into that commission and might be willing to serve.

Sue Mobley

And then that fell apart because every council member got to appoint someone out of their district, and the nepotism that we were trying to avoid in the renaming process, crept its way into the commission process. But we'd also written in a backdoor for the involvement of folks with more expertise and the panels of experts —of which originally there were two, there was one for removal and one for replacement, we merged—became where a lot of the labor of the process happened. It's also worth saying that there's like a couple of layers of experts. There's the formal sort of panel of experts that we put together, that were anchoring that work. And then there's the folks at the New Orleans Public Library in the archives, who did a ton of work; there's the folks at the Historic New Orleans Collection, who helped gather; and then there's the broader community of writers and scholars and researchers who contributed to the final report of the panel. And all of those folks were instrumental.

Daniel Story (narration)

So back when the plan was for me to meet them in person, we thought we might walk some of the streets. That obviously couldn't happen, but I still wanted to ask them to talk me through a specific example or two. So they brought up this interesting case, this cluster of streets in a neighborhood called Lakeview:

Daniel Story

Can you just list out the street names?

Thomas Adams

Sure: Walker, Lane, Mouton, and Bragg.

Daniel Story

So is there a kind of unifying factor around these different individuals that put them on the list?

Sue Mobley

Okay, so here's where things get really fun. This set in Lakeview, all of the streets between the major streets are named in clumps. So it is Confederate generals who served in the Red River campaign in that clump. That clump came up for challenge, in part because the Lakeview Civic Improvement Association submitted their own report to the commission that claimed that the folks named we're not being honored for their Confederate service, they're being honored for their service in the Mexican American War. So the sort of counter that we were brought, really hinged on an idea that the map that was being presented from 1867 was so soon after the Civil War that they like they couldn't possibly have named streets, for Civil War heroes for it. And it's a fun map because it shows the landscape of the city totally platted out into blocks all the way through to the lake. And it's a fun map because like, it doesn't exist, it's not a map of a real thing. It's a marketing device. Because Butler's map of the defenses of New Orleans in 1863, which, you know, had very solid reasons to be accurate, shows a whole lot of Cypress forest and no streets—and they definitely were not building in those streets and draining that swamp during the war years. So the idea that an aspirational map that was produced as part of a marketing scheme, to sell and drain and develop, what would become those lakefront neighborhoods, somehow represented facts on the ground was a huge part of the argument and it was a very surreal argument, because we're looking at the same materials and just seeing radically different things. And we took the claim seriously, we took all claims seriously, that were brought to us and all suggestions seriously, which was a considerable addition to the labor required in this process. We actually dropped a street, because we couldn't conclusively prove that it was the Confederate General that we thought it was and they thought it wasn't. We did find two new streets that were clearly in need of renaming, so that didn't work out the way they wanted it to, but I think, I feel like it was a pretty comfortable trade for us.

Daniel Story (narration)

So that's where things stood with the Lakeview streets back in early 2022, when we last talked. Quite a bit of time has passed since then, it's now fall 2023, more than a year and a half later. Sue and Thomas's piece has just been published in AHR and I thought now would be a good time to check back in with them, to see where things stand:

Daniel Story

So I don't know where to start maybe, like where are things at now? We're talking in October of 2023, where things are at with the renaming initiatives in New Orleans?

Thomas Adams

There are some phrases that come to mind but I want to use different ones. Stalled.

Sue Mobley

That was very diplomatic of you.

Thomas Adams

How to begin...

Sue Mobley

Can we begin with the Renaming Commission's final report was released in March of 2021? So like right after municipal elections, and the champions for streets renaming, were voted off City Council, for reasons that strangely had nothing to do with streets renaming.

Thomas Adams

This new council has shown little interest in continuing the process. I mean, where we're at now is the official recommendations remain. After the January 6 Council vote which pushed through a few, basically, everything else is either been stalled or is again, as we discussed the article, the former Lee Circle, now Harmony Circle, was a backtrack. In the spring of 2022, the council decided to go through with a name that was not recommended by the renaming commission and did so with very little public notice or discussion.

Sue Mobley

You know, where things have not stalled have been in renaming the things that we highlighted as least contentious. So there have been parks that have been nominated. I think they're understood as public spaces and public ownership in a different way. People are attached to their streets and people are attached to things that they have bought into, this is also where homeownership really works to consolidate some of that sense of entitlement to having things stay the way they are.

Thomas Adams

Keeping on the subject of parks, you know, one thing that did go through which at a spatial level, one of the things I'm most proud of, was the renaming of Washington Artillery Park, for Oscar Dunn, the lieutenant governor of Louisiana during reconstruction, and the first African American lieutenant governor in the state and one of the beating hearts behind kind of reconstruction era egalitarian politics in the state. And that's a very prominent space, it's in the French Quarter. It's basically behind, towards the river from Jackson Square, like millions of people go through there, tourists and locals alike. But that one also didn't engender any real,

even though again, in some ways, in terms of its dramatic- in terms of both the prominence of the space, the real shift, in who was being honored, was one of the more dramatic, I think that we saw. And again, that one, as far as I can tell, didn't seem to have too much pushback.

Daniel Story

So you chose to end your AHR piece with that formerly Lee now, Harmony circle scenario? Do you want to say anything more about that, or why you chose to use that as an emphasis to close things in the AHR piece?

Thomas Adams

Yeah, so that on the official recommendation was the Egalité Circle, meant to honor the city's long history, especially during reconstruction at the forefront, of democratic egalitarianism—and the leadership and much of that forefront is still French language speaking—but also the city's deep connection to the Haitian Revolution. That was the official recommendation, it seemed to be going forward. And then somewhat quietly and under the scenes, someone who did not like that name went around the renaming commission, and basically kind of got Harmony Circle through—a name we have both logistical and philosophical issues with to say the least. That's how we kind of end the AHR piece as a suggestion, both of the kind of potential of kind of reimagining how we think about memorialization in relationship not just to the past, but to kind of future aspirations, but also the messy municipal politics of actually successfully doing anything like this.

Sue Mobley

We wanted the article to be really useful to other historians and urbanists, who are thinking about how to engage. And one of the flaws that we own about our process about our team was that we were not sufficiently clear about how inherently political a political process is. This was the sort of perfect landing point if like, there was a huge process, there were many people involved in making a collective decision. The person who went around and got what he wanted at the end had been part of that process throughout. And sometimes you just get whacked, because the conditions on the ground change and somebody sees an opportunity. And that is part of politics, period, municipal politics, I think often in particular, is that those idiosyncratic one person knows one person can make a huge difference in the outcomes.

Daniel Story (narration)

So remember, the four Lakeview streets that the commission was considering for renaming?

Daniel Story

I did have one idea, the actual end of your piece is the appendix.

Thomas Adams

Oh, yeah.

Daniel Story (narration)

The appendix to the AHR piece contains the text of what Thomas read aloud in a commission meeting back in November 2020, outlining the new names that were being put forward for those streets.

Daniel Story

and this is what you read back in November of 2020. Right. I wondered if you'd be open to read...

Daniel Story (narration)

The names were Celestin, Georges, Jasper, and Margaret Elizabeth, all honoring enslaved individuals for their attempts at self-liberation.

Thomas Adams

We suspect the actual kind of verbal reading of this might have shifted a vote or two, which ended up getting the four official votes for those streets. Okay, so I will begin:

In the summer or autumn of 1855, a man named Georges escaped from the estate of the deceased John McDonough, which legally owned both Georges and a good deal of present-day City Park. Sometime in late 1858 or early 1859 a man named Celestin fled James Meekave, a Metairie Ridge man who owned Celestin as property. Around the same time, a man named Jasper escaped from William Martin, the person who owned him as chattel and who also lived near Metairie Ridge alongside the New Basin Canal. In the summer or autumn of 1861, a woman named Margaret Elizabeth fled from John Hersey, the man who owned her as property along Gentilly Ridge, just to the east of what would become City Park.

We know precious little about the lives of Georges, Celestin, Jasper, and Margaret Elizabeth. It's probable that upon Georges' later attainment of his freedom, he worked alongside his wife Marthey and his children truck farm near Gentilly Road, one of the many such farms that line the fringes of the city in that era. We can be fairly certain that when he escaped bondage in late 1858 or early 1859, it was not Celestin's first attempt at self-liberation. It's likely that after gaining his freedom as a result of the defeat of the treason against the United States, Jasper

became a tanner and resided in the 6th Ward. As for Margaret Elizabeth, no other known records of her life survived to us.

Like 4 million other Americans in 1860—nearly 13% of the nation's population—Celestin, Georges, Jasper, and Margaret Elizabeth were owned as property. In Louisiana, they represented just four of the more than 330,000 people held in bondage in the state, fully 47% of the total number of Louisianans. The vast majority of these women and men lived lives of complete anonymity. They toiled harvesting sugar, picking cotton, maintaining households and in countless other forms of labor. The possibility of the whip, rape, and being sold far away from parents, children, spouses and loved ones was omnipresent. In the words of an esteemed southern jurist, "the power of the master (was) absolute so as to render the submission the slave perfect." Off their enslaved bodies, New Orleans and the Mississippi Valley produced more millionaires per capita than anywhere in world history up until that point.

That we know anything about the lives of Celestin, George, Jasper, and Margaret Elizabeth is owed to the fact that between 1855 and 1861, each took the momentous step of attempting to liberate themselves from slavery. Given the city's geography at the time, upon leaving the men who own them as property and use their bodies for whatever they saw fit, it's quite possible they initially hid out in the swamp land around present day Bragg, Lane, Mouton, and Walker streets while attempting to reunite with loved ones sold far away, or to secure passage on a boat to freedom in Canada, Mexico, or the British or French Caribbean.

That they left at all took an uncommon courage. For the simple reasons of surveillance and isolation, most enslaved Americans never had meaningful opportunities to do so. Being caught—a likelihood in most context—meant a simple outcome: torture. It's not just their individual courage though that deserves honor but the very real historical results of their actions. Each person who attempted to emancipate themselves made the maintenance of the institution of slavery and the entire economic, cultural, and social system built around it in New Orleans and the broader South that much more difficult to maintain. In fact, as now three generations of the most respected historical scholarship has made clear, it was these individual actions of courage that, in the final analysis, have transformed the Civil War from a fight over slavery into a fight for emancipation and freedom. Unlike thousands of others like them whose names and anonymous acts of heroism are lost to history—resting in honor glory known only to God, to paraphrase one of our nation's most sacred monuments to other unknowns—Celestin, Georges, Jasper, and Margaret Elizabeth, are known to us in the here and now. They deserve our city and nation's undying thanks and honor.

And that was the narrative for those four in the Renaming Commission that did vote to go forward, and rename those four streets after which to our knowledge, should it ever actually be officially enacted, will be the first four official place names in the United States honoring people for their attempts at self-liberation from slavery.

Daniel Story

Well, thank you for reading that Thomas. I like, in a way ending on that note for lots of reasons, but it does focus back onto the really powerful, meaningful work that your panel of experts did through this process. Well, I certainly hope that some of the better kinds of outcomes that you're talking about as potentialities do come about in New Orleans, in the next year or two or three.

Sue Mobley

Me too, though I'll mostly settle for us having potable water. That's the bar now.

Thomas Adams

It's retreating Sue, it's retreating.

Sue Mobley

I know, I sent you the thing last night, its like five miles away now.

Thomas Adams

Yeah.

Daniel Story

Well, thank you both for taking this time to talk with me.

Matt Hermene

That was Daniel Story talking to Sue Mobley and Thomas Adams. Their essay, titled "Engraving Egalité in New Orleans: Street Renaming and the Municipal Politics of History" can be found in the History Lab forum titled "Mismonumentalizing and Decolonizing: Public History as History for the Public" in the September issue of the American Historical Review. Before that, you heard my conversation with Durba Ghosh who introduces the forum. "History in Focus" is a production of the American Historical Review in partnership with the American Historical Association and the University Library at the University of California Santa Cruz. Episode 2.3 was produced by Daniel Story and me, Matt Hermene. You can find more

information about this and other episodes at americanhistoricalreview.org. Thanks for listening to this episode of "History in Focus."