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Campus Presentation Examines Memory and Fact Surrounding Legacy of Slavery

Social Justice Week lecture traces what Americans know about the history of slavery and its impact on contemporary society

October 20, 2014 | Jill Rodrigues ’05

BRISTOL, R.I. – When we as Americans – particularly northerners – contemplate our history of enslaving Africans, we tend to frame it as the nightmare that happened down south approximately 150 years ago. But how many of us know that many northerners were complicit in the profiteering from this nightmare, or recognize that the legacy of slavery did not tidily end with the liberating decree of the Emancipation Proclamation and conclusion of the Civil War?

In an interactive multimedia presentation Thursday evening in the School of Law, James DeWolf Perry – executive director of The Tracing Center, a Boston-based nonprofit dedicated to educating the public about the history and legacy of America’s era of slavery – exploded the myths and misperceptions Americans have accepted about this period. The presentation was part of Social Justice Week at Roger Williams, an annual series of events that explores the serious problems affecting society and offers ways for students to become involved in making change.

With “Emancipation to Equality: The Unfinished Business of Civil War and Civil Rights,” DeWolf Perry examined more than a century of racial history, “not just to ask what progress did we make, but to ask what do we not remember about this period that distracts us from what actually happened – and, therefore, what we have to achieve today?”
Illustrating the role of some white northerners in the slave trade via DeWolf Perry’s ancestors from Bristol, R.I., he explained how the south “specialized in owning slaves while the north specialized in the buying and selling of slaves.”

It was a lucrative business (to the tune of 85 percent of sales in the entire American slave trade being reaped in the north), according to DeWolf Perry, and an astonishing 58 percent of all slaves shipped to the U.S. were sold by people who lived in the Ocean State. His great-great-great-great-grandfather, James DeWolf, was “the leading slave-trader in the country” who began life almost penniless, but died the second richest man in America off the backs of enslaved Africans via the highly profitable Triangle Trade.

James DeWolf sold more than 10,000 Africans into slavery, accounting for about half-a-million descendants alive today, according to research his family has conducted and shared in an Emmy-nominated PBS documentary, *Traces of the Trade: A Story From the Deep North*.

In addition to the sale of slaves, northerners financed southern slave plantations, invested in slavery voyages and benefited from the inexpensive goods resulting from slave labor. You may never think of America’s rise to industrial prowess the same way again – or locally, of the Northeast’s dominance and wealth built upon textile mills – after learning the source of that cotton. Or the fact that many Northerners greatly resisted the idea of terminating slavery, because many owned slaves themselves or derived their businesses in some way from slavery, DeWolf Perry said.

To drive this point home, DeWolf Perry quoted U.S. President John Quincy Adams who indirectly asserted how slavery was central to establishing America’s economic might: “I don’t know why we should blush to confess that molasses was an essential ingredient in American independence.”

But once the Civil War was won and slavery outlawed in the Thirteenth Amendment, the issue of slavery was wrapped up in a neat bow, right? That’s another public myth that has been ingrained in our cultural conscience, DeWolf Perry said.

Instead, some individual states (including in the north and west) outlawed slavery on the books and then banned blacks via “negro removal policies” from living in their communities. Slaves were still outright owned in some states, he said.

In fact, the idea that the majority supported the Union Army’s fight to free black slaves is largely incorrect, DeWolf Perry said – the soldiers and their families backed the war to keep the Union together. “When Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation it causes a morale crisis among the Union soldiers and their families, who are horrified that their sacrifices are no longer to fight for the Union,” DeWolf Perry explained.

He said it caused draft riots in New York City, where free blacks were lynched and a black orphanage burned to the ground. The mayor suggested New York City secede as an independent city-state, rather than cease trading with the south. Even the Congress comprised of all northern representatives rejected the Thirteenth Amendment upon the first vote, requiring serious political cajoling from Lincoln to earn enough votes the second round.
All of this ushered in another century of brutality and disenfranchisement for blacks via the Jim Crow era, DeWolf Perry said. With the Ku Klux Klan holding political offices and controlling police departments, lynchings and burning of black communities were rampant, while segregation and access to employment, adequate education and social programs became de-facto or law for blacks.

While the Civil Rights movement heralded some watershed freedoms for the black community, DeWolf Perry asked the audience how much society has progressed in the 50 years since then and how might things still be improved? Guests offered ideas ranging from acceptance of the past as a way to move forward to raising awareness about the facts and redesigning the public school curriculum to better educate youths.

Summing up the engaging discussion among guests, DeWolf Perry emphasized that we should not focus on how much conditions have improved for blacks since the Civil Rights era and more on how to improve the disparities – gaps in wealth and access to social programs, and inherently hurtful racial attitudes – that still oppress the black community as the inheritance of a heinous period in American history.

Be like Roger Williams, an audience member added, and fight to eradicate injustice through words and action.