

Race, Place, and the Pennsylvania Emancipation Exposition of 1913

PHILADELPHIA IS WELL KNOWN FOR ITS TWO EXPOSITIONS celebrating the Declaration of Independence, the shining Centennial of 1876 and the comparatively dismal Sesquicentennial of 1926. In between, but long obscured in the physical and historical landscape, the city's African Americans commemorated another milestone in American history.¹ In 1913, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, black Philadelphians obtained state funding for an exposition, constructed exhibit buildings, invited delegations from around the country, and staged a massive parade, professional and religious congresses, and an athletics festival. In the process, they confronted the racial and political tensions of a city controlled by machine politicians and experiencing simultaneous surges of immigration by African Americans from the South and eastern and southern Europeans. The Pennsylvania Emancipation Exposition, like other expositions during this era of ambitious world's fairs, provides a cultural snapshot of its era. This event, little remembered and invisible at the site where it occurred, offers an opportunity to consider intersections of race, place, material culture, and memory in a major American city from the early twentieth century to the present.

¹ Commemorations of emancipation are described in Mitch Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808–1915* (Amherst, MA, 2003); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 370–80; and Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), 195–205, but the Philadelphia event is mentioned only in passing. The exposition is not included in the only major narrative history of Philadelphia published since 1913, Russell F. Weigley, ed., *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History* (New York, 1982), which devotes significant attention to the Centennial and Sesquicentennial. Although African Methodist clergy participated in leadership roles, the exposition is not mentioned in Robert Gregg, *Sparks from the Anvil of Oppression: Philadelphia's African Methodists and Southern Migrants, 1890–1940* (Philadelphia, 1993). The opening of the exposition appears in an unpublished dissertation, Charles Ashley Hardy III, "Race and Opportunity: Black Philadelphia during the Era of the Great Migration, 1916–1930" (PhD diss., Temple University, 1989).

Scholars have identified cities as sites of “collective memory” and “contested memory,” but the Pennsylvania Emancipation Exposition of 1913 also calls attention to a city of *selective* memory in which aspects of the past are sifted and shifted by changing populations and the evolving urban environment.² Strikingly, the site of the Emancipation Exposition has evolved into today’s Marconi Plaza, a place devoted to the commemoration of Italian American heritage. In the interim, this square at Broad Street and Oregon Avenue in South Philadelphia also served as a focal point of the Sesquicentennial celebration of the Declaration of Independence. This site embodies layers of local, national, and international history, some more evident than others. Bringing the Emancipation Exposition back into the plaza’s history should not diminish its significance as a site of national or Italian American commemoration; indeed, this Philadelphia park gives us access to the entwined struggles of defining American freedom and forging connections with the nation’s past.

The Pennsylvania Emancipation Exposition, which ran from September 14 until October 4, 1913, was an achievement for black Philadelphians, but it also proved to be an exercise in frustration as it fell short of its boosters’ ambitious plans. Pennsylvania’s celebration was one in a series of activities staged around the nation to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Together, these events aspired to celebrate African American progress, promote further advancement, and sustain a memory of emancipation as the lasting legacy of the Civil War.³ The National Negro Business League, founded by Booker T. Washington in 1900, and other African American leaders had hoped to mark the anniversary with a national exposition, perhaps in

² On the relationship between memory and urban environments, see M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), and Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA, 1995). The significance of forgetting in the construction of memory is developed most fully in David Gross, *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture* (Amherst, MA, 2000). The need for greater attention to forgetting is argued in Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler, eds., *The Art of Forgetting* (Oxford, 1999).

³ On the history of emancipation celebrations and the work of sustaining the memory of emancipation as a Civil War legacy, see David Blight, “‘For Something Beyond the Battlefield’: Frederick Douglass and the Struggle for the Memory of the Civil War,” in *Memory and American History*, ed. David Thelen (Bloomington, IN, 1990), 27–49; Geneviève Fabre, “African-American Commemorative Celebrations in the Nineteenth Century,” in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally (New York, 1994), 72–91; William H. Wiggins Jr., *O Freedom! Afro-American Emancipation Celebrations* (Knoxville, TN, 1987).

a southern city or in Chicago, a magnet for northward migration. When efforts to gain federal funding for a national celebration failed in Congress, however, Washington and others encouraged communities to arrange their own emancipation events. Between 1913 and 1915, African Americans organized emancipation anniversary events in many localities, including such major cities as New York, Chicago, and Washington, DC.⁴

The exposition in Philadelphia was notable as one of only three emancipation commemorations to receive state government funding—and at ninety-five thousand dollars, the largest of the state appropriations.⁵ The Philadelphia event also had an organizational lineage that suggests what a national exposition might have become. The national effort and the Philadelphia event were linked through the activism of the Wright family, originally from Georgia but gradually relocating to Philadelphia during the early twentieth-century migration out of the South. The family patriarch, Richard R. Wright Sr., did not move north until the 1920s, but his influence extended to the Philadelphia commemoration. Wright, known as “Major Wright” in recognition of his service as a paymaster during the Spanish-American War, was born in slavery in Georgia in 1855. Gaining access to school as well as college during the Reconstruction era, Wright rose to prominence as an educator; as the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation approached, he served as president of the State College of Industry for Colored Youth (later renamed Savannah State College). He also promoted state fairs to exhibit African American achievements.⁶ Wright shared a commitment to African American history with his son and namesake, Richard R. Wright Jr., who by 1913 had settled in Philadelphia. The younger Wright was a rising leader in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He later became a bishop of the church; in 1913, at age thirty-five, he edited the denominational newspaper *The Christian Recorder* and had published *The Negro in Pennsylvania*,

⁴ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 370–80; *Negro Year Book and Annual Encyclopedia of the Negro* (Tuskegee, AL, 1912), microfilm, reel 250, *Tuskegee Institute News Clippings File*, ed. John W. Kitchens et al. (Tuskegee, AL; Sanford, NC, 1976); Booker T. Washington, “A Circular on the Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration of Emancipation,” Feb. 3, 1913, *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, vol. 12, ed. Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock (Urbana, IL, 1982), 112; House Committee on Industrial Arts and Expositions, “Celebration of the Semicentennial Anniversary of the Act of Emancipation,” 63rd Cong., 2nd sess., May 27, 1914, Record Group 233, National Archives.

⁵ *Negro Year Book* (Tuskegee Institute, AL, 1914–1915), 1.

⁶ *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, s.v. “Wright, Richard Robert Sr.”; Elizabeth Ross Haynes, *The Black Boy of Atlanta* (Boston, 1952). Also see Clyde W. Hall, *One Hundred Years of Educating at Savannah State College, 1890–1990* (East Peoria, IL, 1991).

an economic history which also served as his doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania.⁷

The Wrights, together with W. E. B. Du Bois, editor of the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine, went to Washington in 1912 to seek congressional funding for the hoped-for national exposition to commemorate the Emancipation Proclamation. Testifying before the Senate Committee on Industrial Expositions, Major Wright described the success of state fairs in Georgia and pointed out that while Congress had appropriated millions of dollars for exhibitions since the Centennial of 1876, African Americans had asked for nothing for similar purposes. "Help us show that we are striving our best to develop the resources of this country," he asked. "Help us to gain the hearty good will of all the people of the country." He then deferred to his son, who outlined the achievements of African Americans since emancipation, with statistics to bolster every point. Du Bois then emphasized the educational advantages of an exposition, including the possibility that the event might give way to a permanent museum. The Wrights and Du Bois were praised by senators for their eloquence and knowledgeable testimony, but their request for \$250,000 in federal funds died without a vote. Debating the proposal, some senators viewed the request as a justifiable form of repayment to people who so recently had been held in slavery; others, however, had developed a dim view of federal funding for expositions generally and questioned whether African Americans would have the means to travel to a national exposition. Some senators raised questions about federal oversight of the funds, not trusting the corporation which Major Wright had organized as a vehicle for the national event.⁸

Without federal funding, the commemoration of African American emancipation and the attention of prominent black citizens shifted from the national to the local level, and planning for a Pennsylvania Emancipation Exposition in Philadelphia began. While W. E. B. Du Bois turned his attention to commemorative activities in New York, the

⁷ "Wright, Bishop Richard Robert Jr.," in *The Encyclopaedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, ed. Richard R. Wright Jr., 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1947), 311–12; Richard R. Wright Jr., *The Negro in Pennsylvania: A Study in Economic History* (1912; New York, 1969). Richard R. Wright Jr. recalls the importance of history in the Wright household in his autobiography, *87 Years behind the Black Curtain* (Philadelphia, 1965), 54–55.

⁸ Senate, 62nd Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record*, Apr. 4, 1912, 4172–80. In addition to the Wrights and Du Bois, the Senate committee heard a brief statement of support from the Rev. I. N. Ross, pastor of the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church of Washington, DC.

Wrights directed their energies toward Philadelphia. Richard R. Wright Jr. played a leading role, becoming director of exhibits and participating in the lengthy planning process. The elder Wright also channeled some of his interest in the fiftieth anniversary observance to Philadelphia, where he was a featured speaker and honored dignitary.⁹

The Pennsylvania Emancipation Exposition took shape within the multiple contexts of race, politics, and the changing population and landscape of the city of Philadelphia. As the fiftieth anniversary of the proclamation approached, Philadelphia's growing African American population became a sought-after voting bloc for the ruling Republican Party. Philadelphia had a deeply rooted African American community, which traced its ancestry to the days preceding William Penn and which had weathered the racism, violence, and economic deprivation of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ At the turn of the twentieth century—even before the First World War prompted the greatest migration out of the South—the city experienced a significant influx of African American southerners. Philadelphia's black population grew from 39,371 counted in the 1890 census to 62,613 in 1900 and 84,459 in 1910.¹¹ Although treated with hostility by many white residents and barred from the best-paying industrial jobs, by 1910 black Philadelphians were sufficiently important at the polls that the Republican organization supported the election of the first black state legislator in Pennsylvania—Republican Harry W. Bass, a lawyer who served two terms in the state House of Representatives. Born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, in 1866, Bass graduated from Lincoln University and earned his law degree at the University of Pennsylvania in 1896, then became active in Philadelphia politics.¹² In partnership with Harrisburg journalist and exposition booster James H. W. Howard, Bass championed the prospects for an Emancipation Exposition in Pennsylvania and obtained state appropriations for the event.¹³ In the process, Bass became a lightning rod for attacks by white Philadelphians

⁹ *Philadelphia Tribune*, Apr. 19, 1913, Sept. 20, 1913; *Christian Recorder*, Feb. 13, 1913, reel 240, Tuskegee Institute News Clippings File.

¹⁰ See Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720–1840* (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

¹¹ Gregg, *Sparks from the Anvil of Oppression*, 21–43.

¹² For Bass's biography, see Frank L. Mather, ed., *Who's Who of the Colored Race*, vol. 1 (Chicago, 1915), 21; *Philadelphia Tribune*, Nov. 9, 1912, June 16, 1917. On the social and economic status of African Americans, see Wright, *Negro in Pennsylvania*.

¹³ *Official Scope and Plan Book: Emancipation Proclamation Celebration and Exposition* (Harrisburg, PA, 1913), 9–10.

who viewed his effort as a sham to enrich himself and the Republican machine.

From the moment that Bass obtained the first twenty-five thousand dollar state appropriation for the exposition in 1911, the racial and political tensions that defined Philadelphia and the state of Pennsylvania during these years also characterized the process of planning and staging the exposition. Racial distrust could be seen in the Pennsylvania Emancipation Commission appointed by Governor John K. Tener to oversee the event. Of the seven members, only one—Harry Bass—was African American. He was appointed secretary of the commission rather than chairman, a position awarded to William E. Crow of Uniontown, Pennsylvania. As a practical matter, however, Bass functioned as the primary organizer of the exposition, backed by a network of committees made up of black civic and religious leaders.¹⁴

In Philadelphia, connections between the Emancipation Exposition and Republican politics drew public scrutiny that the event might otherwise have escaped. Republicans had built a powerful political machine through the late nineteenth century, strengthened by the votes of African Americans and European immigrants.¹⁵ In the Progressive Era, reform politicians and sympathetic newspapers challenged the machine, temporarily wresting city hall away from Republican control in 1911 with the election of Mayor Rudolph Blankenburg.¹⁶ Primed by years of aggressive attacks against the Republicans, the *North American* newspaper portrayed the exposition as a funnel for money to move from the state's coffers to the pockets of the machine. The *North American* pointed out that exposition organizers were paying rent to the Republican Party for an office in a building at 1352 Lombard Street, which the newspaper labeled "the notorious Senate Club." The paper portrayed a statewide fund-raising campaign as a pyramid scheme, Bass's travel on behalf of the exposition as a wasteful junket, the designs for exposition buildings as impractical dreams, and the selected exhibition site as a garbage dump foisted on the exposition by Republican operatives.¹⁷ The newspaper

¹⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵ Peter McCaffery, *When Bosses Ruled Philadelphia: The Emergence of the Republican Machine, 1867–1933* (University Park, PA, 1993).

¹⁶ Lloyd M. Abernethy, "Progressivism, 1905–1919," in *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, ed. Weigley, 524–65.

¹⁷ *Philadelphia North American*, Dec. 2, 1912, Feb. 7, 1913, June 9, 1913, Aug. 11, 1913, Sept. 4, 1913, Sept. 13, 1913, Oct. 16, 1913, Oct. 19, 1913, Nov. 7, 1913.

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Philadelphia Tribune, Aug. 16, 1913.

emphasized its interest in exposing political corruption, but in the process its articles depicted African Americans as naive tools of the Republican Party. Other white newspapers in Philadelphia paid scant attention to the exposition prior to its opening, reflecting another aspect of the city's racial divide by rendering a major event among African Americans invisible until it could no longer be ignored.

In contrast to the white press, the African American *Philadelphia Tribune* constructed a starkly different narrative of the months preceding the exposition. In the *Tribune*, the exposition took shape in an orderly series of committee meetings led by the community's most prominent citizens. Their efforts became thwarted, however, by delays caused by white opponents who criticized the use of state money and devised bureaucratic maneuvers to hold up necessary building permits.¹⁸ One cartoon published in the *Tribune* invoked the memories of Frederick

¹⁸ *Philadelphia Tribune*, Dec. 7, 1912, Dec. 14, 1912, Jan. 18, 1913, Feb. 8, 1913, Mar. 8, 1913, Mar. 29, 1913, Apr. 5, 1913, Apr. 12, 1913, June 21, 1913, July 5, 1913, Aug. 2, 1913, Aug. 16, 1913, Aug. 23, 1913, Sept. 6, 1913.



Philadelphia Tribune, Sept. 27, 1913.

Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and Charles Sumner to urge the exposition planners to persevere despite the obstacles placed in their way. In the gendered language of the day, the cartoon's caption encouraged the exposition organizers to "press manfully on. Remember that your ability to o'erleap difficulties will establish the fact of your sterling manhood."¹⁹ Another cartoon published in the *Tribune* depicted the long arm of prejudice wielding a hammer over the exposition and exclaiming, "How Dare you Darkies Get \$95,000." The arm of prejudice was shown emerging from the headquarters of the exposition's most vociferous critic—the *North American*, the white-owned newspaper that had constructed an entirely different version of events.²⁰

Few sources other than the press accounts survive to help us determine whether the exposition was a model of civic achievement or political corruption. Although the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania appointed a commission to oversee the event, the records are not among the other special commission records held by the Pennsylvania State Archives. The exposition planners did rent office space from the Republican Party, lending credence to the *North American's* charge that the project was funneling money to the machine. Furthermore, the Republican state legislature gave its unanimous approval in 1912 to increase the appropriation for the event

¹⁹ *Philadelphia Tribune*, Aug. 16, 1913.

²⁰ *Philadelphia Tribune*, Sept. 27, 1913.

from twenty-five thousand to ninety-five thousand dollars.²¹ Even then, the exposition overran its budget by four thousand dollars; the Exposition Commission declared that no scandal existed, but one exposition sculptor sued Bass for nonpayment, and exposition workers at one point gathered around Bass's home to protest that they, too, had not been paid.²²

Nevertheless, the Pennsylvania Emancipation Exposition did take place in September 1913. Lasting only three weeks, it was a smaller, briefer affair than Philadelphia's better-remembered expositions in 1876 and 1926. The Emancipation Exposition opened several weeks behind schedule, surprising some delegations from other states that arrived for the originally announced opening day. Still, it was a significant event for African Americans in Philadelphia, who turned out by the thousands to participate. Bishop L. J. Coppin of the A.M.E. Church predicted that the exposition grounds would be "historic forever."²³ The *Tribune* predicted that the opening of the Emancipation Exposition would "go down into history as being one of the most eventful days."²⁴ The white-owned *Inquirer* similarly called the exposition's first day "one of the greatest days in the history of the race in this country."²⁵

The South Philadelphia site of the exposition, made available by the city of Philadelphia, was grandly labeled "City Plaza" on municipal maps, but in 1913 the tract at Broad Street and Oregon Avenue marked the southern limit of the city's residential and commercial development. Broad Street, the main north-south artery of the city, had not yet been paved so far south. No buildings stood south of Oregon Avenue. The municipal government had drawn plans to transform the "plaza" into a landscaped city square, but this remained in the future in 1913.²⁶ The site had no relationship to African Americans, past or present. Nearby residential neighborhoods were dominated by Italian immigrants, who arrived in increasing numbers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The nearest African American neighborhoods stood two miles to the north, along Philadelphia's South and Lombard Streets. However,

²¹ Pennsylvania General Assembly, *House Journal* (1913), 4635, 4865, 4875, 5009, 5512; *Senate Journal* (1913), 2746, 2787, 2968, 3197, 3438.

²² *Philadelphia North American*, Aug. 4, 1913, Oct. 16, 1913, Oct. 19, 1913, Nov. 7, 1913, Nov. 21, 1913.

²³ *Philadelphia Record*, Sept. 15, 1913.

²⁴ *Philadelphia Tribune*, Sept. 20, 1913.

²⁵ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sept. 15, 1913.

²⁶ Plaza plans, Photographs Folder 249, Philadelphia City Archives.

the site was easily reached by streetcar lines and readily available for quick construction. With city building permits delayed until mid-August by the summer vacations of city officials, African American contractors and construction workers had less than a month to prepare the grounds and erect three exhibition buildings

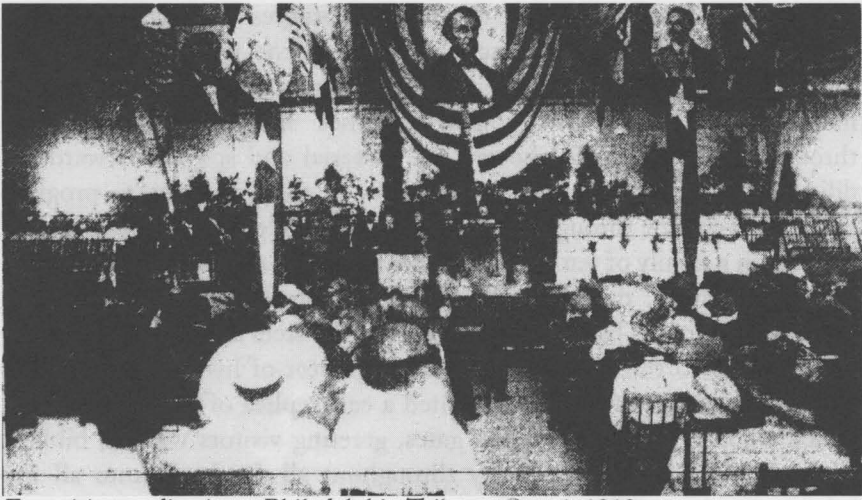
In common with other expositions of the era, the buildings for the Emancipation Exposition were temporary structures intended to project an illusion of grandeur but actually faced with staff, the plaster and fiber exterior coating often used in world's fair buildings. Although temporary, these were large buildings and significant additions to the built environment of South Philadelphia. Designed by African American architect C. Henry Wilson of Philadelphia, the largest of the three buildings was the Administration Building, a white, two-story Beaux-Arts structure 84 feet by 176 feet, housing an auditorium, dining room, and exhibit space. Next in size, the Amusement Building included a Concert and Lecture Hall. A smaller, barn-like Agricultural Building and an athletic field completed the exposition grounds.²⁷

The Emancipation Exposition opened with an interdenominational religious congress on Sunday, September 14. More than five thousand people gathered in the very recently completed exposition auditorium, which had been decorated with American flags, yellow and blue bunting, and oil paintings of Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown. A choir of two thousand men, women, and children lifted their voices to the occasion, and Bishop Coppin launched the exposition with a sermon on "The Religious Progress of the Emancipated Race." He recalled the earliest efforts by Pennsylvania Quakers to abolish slavery and praised William Penn as a promoter of tolerance. Emphasizing African Americans' spiritual growth through Christianity, he urged his listeners to value their religious heritage as well as the material progress to be displayed at the exposition.²⁸

While the religious service opened the exposition for a predominantly African American audience, the event made its public debut the next day, when a parade featuring five thousand participants stepped off from Girard Avenue and marched south to the exposition grounds. The four-mile route passed the landmarks of Philadelphia's white establishment—its most prominent office buildings, some of its finest hotels and cultural

²⁷ *Official Scope and Plan Book*, 1, 5, 11, 14, 19, 20–21.

²⁸ *Philadelphia Tribune*, Sept. 20, 1913; *Philadelphia Record*, Sept. 15, 1913.



Exposition auditorium. *Philadelphia Tribune*, Oct. 4, 1913.

institutions, and the mammoth City Hall. Crowds estimated at between twenty-five thousand and fifty thousand lined the sidewalks of the route; many others could have watched from office windows overlooking Broad Street. For onlookers, the parade presented a pageant of African American progress, with an opening float depicting a cotton harvest quickly giving way to displays of black achievements in the arts, sciences, and business. Parade units also underscored African American sacrifices for the nation. As the *Tribune* described it, "There were men in line who had been slaves and who fought for freedom; there were soldiers and sailors who fought in '61, and still younger ones who are now in the army and navy."²⁹ The parade also acknowledged the continuing struggle for inclusion with a float devoted to the woman suffrage campaign. Marching bands led the procession south to the exposition, where five thousand people were admitted to an opening program of speeches and music by the grand chorus of two thousand. In addition to Pennsylvanians, the audience included delegations of African Americans invited from every state.

The theme of progress prevailed for the duration of the exposition. While prominent speakers addressed congresses of clergymen, sociologists, doctors, and educators, exhibits put the achievements of African Americans on tangible display for the estimated one hundred thousand visitors who toured the grounds. The exhibits emphasized the value of

²⁹ *Philadelphia Tribune*, Sept. 20, 1913.

education and industry, with the path to progress through education represented by displays by black colleges and the promise of industry dramatized by young women busily operating a bank of twenty sewing machines. Photographs of black churches and black homeowners throughout Pennsylvania showed the material and spiritual rewards of diligence. Exhibits also carried the message that obstacles to progress could be overcome through hard work. For example, S. R. Simmons, who grew up in a family of ten in western Pennsylvania and had only a primary school education, displayed the nozzle for steel casting that he had invented. Simmons had started working in the steel industry as a laborer, but he came to the exposition as the proprietor of his own foundry. In addition to his invention, he exhibited a cast replica of the Liberty Bell, which stood near the exposition gates, greeting visitors with its biblical admonition to "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof."³⁰

In its devotion to African American progress, the Pennsylvania Emancipation Exposition followed in the tradition of freedom celebrations as they had developed in the United States during the nineteenth century. But black Pennsylvanians also shared in an undercurrent of ambivalence about celebrating progress in 1913.³¹ In fact, how much had African Americans progressed since 1863? In Pennsylvania, where slavery was abolished long before the Civil War, the history of African Americans differed markedly from the experience of their enslaved counterparts in the South. Following Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Act of 1780, Philadelphia became home to a vibrant free black community whose members continued to press for abolition of slavery elsewhere in the United States. Philadelphia was the birthplace of civic groups such as the Free African Society and pioneering African American churches and businesses. In contrast, the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century struck some black Philadelphians as a period of decline, if not crisis. In 1911, even as planning proceeded for the Emancipation Exposition, a lynching took place in Coatesville, Pennsylvania.³² Certainly, the legal status of freedom represented progress over slavery, but what of black Philadelphians in 1913?

³⁰ *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Sept. 16, 1913.

³¹ Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, 40–41, 149–50.

³² Emma Lapsansky, *Black Presence in Pennsylvania: "Making It Home"* (University Park, PA, 1990), 25.

Dr. Henry M. Minton, an African American physician and cofounder of Philadelphia's Mercy Hospital, addressed this issue in a paper delivered to the American Negro Historical Society in March 1913. African Americans had made headway in the professions, he noted, but what of the business community? Where were the black caterers, once a prosperous foothold in the economy? Where were the black shopkeepers? "There is no doubt that we have not kept pace with the onward march of progress in this country during the last half century," he concluded. "We have flown to the professions, with the result that we are top heavy. However brilliant may be the ministers or the lawyers or the physicians, they are resting upon a weak foundation of hard working and poorly paid people, however sincere or true."³³ Similarly, Richard R. Wright Jr.'s economic history of African Americans in Pennsylvania identified the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a period of decline. The Civil War marked "a distinct break" in the "character" of the African American population, he wrote. Reflecting the widening class divisions among African Americans in the early twentieth century, Wright associated the decline with the arrival of poorly educated, poorly trained, "ignorant type" former slaves from the South. As they changed African American communities, according to Wright, the new migrants also invited harsh reactions from white Pennsylvanians. Such developments contributed to Wright's commitment to highlighting the achievements of African Americans, against the backdrop of challenges presented by the continuing migration from the South.³⁴

Perhaps this tension between boosterism and concern contributed to the fading of the Emancipation Exposition from public memory. For such a prominent public event, especially among black Philadelphians, the exposition left little trace in published histories or on the physical landscape of Philadelphia. To some extent, this may be viewed as a clear case of racial neglect—of African American history being marginalized by historians. Most narrative histories of Philadelphia have paid only glancing attention to African Americans, despite their deep and significant role in the city's history.³⁵ The experience of European immigrants to Philadelphia has drawn far greater scholarly attention than the experience

³³ Henry M. Minton, *Early History of Negroes in Business in Philadelphia* (Nashville, TN, 1913), 20; *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, s.v. "Minton, Henry McKee."

³⁴ Wright, *Negro in Pennsylvania*, 52–53; Wright, *87 Years behind the Black Curtain*, 153–55.

³⁵ For example, Ron Avery, *A Concise History of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2001), relegates African American history to one closing chapter.

of African American migrants from the South.³⁶ Even in works devoted to the city's African American history, the exposition has seldom appeared.³⁷ The Emancipation Exposition, reported primarily in the African American press and leaving scant records in historical archives, has surfaced only in one unpublished dissertation and briefly in a recent history of African American emancipation commemorations.³⁸

Other factors contributing to the decline of memory of the Emancipation Exposition may have been the taint of scandal and an element of disappointment in the event itself. Shortly after the exposition controversies, Harry Bass lost the backing of the Republican Party and his seat in the state legislature.³⁹ Richard R. Wright Jr., the director of exhibits, did not mention the exposition in his autobiography, even though he described participating in other emancipation commemorations in Springfield, Illinois, in 1900 and in New York City in 1936.⁴⁰ Although characterized favorably by Philadelphia newspapers, especially the *Tribune*, the exposition was sharply criticized in the *New York Age*. The *Age*'s unidentified correspondent praised the exhibit buildings and prominent speakers but found the exhibits meager and disappointing. In contrast to the views of the exposition's Pennsylvania boosters, "The exhibit was a dismal, gloomy and disappointing failure and no honest person can use any other words in characterizing it," according to the *Age* correspondent. "I hope this exhibition of failure, right in the heart of the North, will go far to teach our race that in the future when we undertake anything that is to come before the public we should be very careful to see that everything is planned as to bring about success and not failure."⁴¹ Certainly, Philadelphia's effort did not match New York's elaborate

³⁶ For an overview of the vast bibliography of ethnic experience in Philadelphia, see Allen F. Davis and Mark H. Haller, eds., *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class Life, 1790-1940*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1998). On African American migration, in addition to Gregg, *Sparks from the Anvil of Oppression*, which focuses closely on the role of churches, see Frederic Miller, "The Black Migration to Philadelphia: A 1924 Profile," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 108 (1984): 315-50, reprinted in *African Americans in Pennsylvania: Shifting Historical Perspectives*, ed. Joe William Trotter Jr. and Eric Ledell Smith (University Park, PA, 1997), 287-316.

³⁷ For example, Charles L. Blockson, *African Americans in Pennsylvania: A History and Guide* (Baltimore, 1994); Lapsansky, *Black Presence in Pennsylvania*.

³⁸ Hardy, "Race and Opportunity"; Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, 250.

³⁹ *Philadelphia North American*, Dec. 18, 1913. After his two terms in the legislature, Bass was appointed an assistant city solicitor for Philadelphia; he died June 9, 1917.

⁴⁰ Wright, *87 Years behind the Black Curtain*, 201, 210.

⁴¹ *New York Age*, Oct. 9, 1913, reel 240, *Tuskegee Institute News Clippings File*.

commemoration, which featured Du Bois's historical pageant, *The Star of Ethiopia*.⁴²

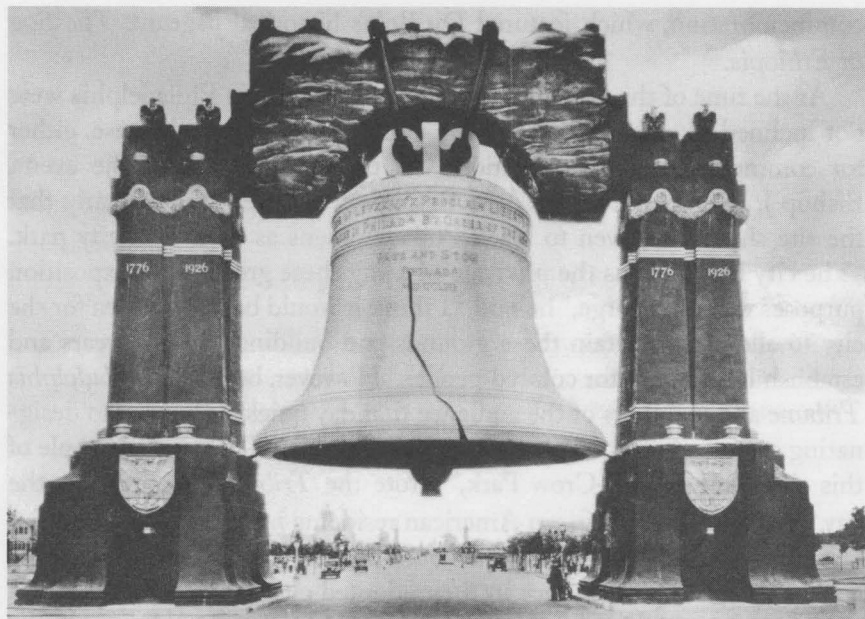
At the time of the exposition, African Americans in Philadelphia were not inclined to claim the exposition site for their continuing use, either for commemoration or recreation. On the opening day of the event, Bishop J. S. Caldwell of the A.M.E. Church declared triumphantly that the site should be given to black Philadelphians as their own city park. "The city has given us the privilege of using these grounds for exposition purposes without charge," he said. "I think it would be a good idea for the city to allow us to retain these grounds and buildings for five years and establish here a park for colored people." However, both the *Philadelphia Tribune* and members of the audience that day quickly objected to designating such a segregated-use park in Philadelphia. "The colored people of this city want no Jim Crow Park," wrote the *Tribune's* reporter for the day.⁴³ With so many African American residents having recently fled Jim Crow practices in the South, few could be expected to endorse an officially segregated public space in their adopted city. When the exposition closed in early October 1913, so did African American attachment to the land at Broad Street and Oregon Avenue. Neither the site nor the event played a part in later commemorations of the Emancipation Proclamation, in 1938 for the seventy-fifth anniversary or in 1963 for its centennial.

The fading of this event from the historical and physical landscape also resulted from the evolving urban environment and changing ethnic makeup of the city during the twentieth century. After the Emancipation Exposition, its temporary buildings were demolished and the city proceeded to landscape the "City Plaza" as part of a development and beautification effort for far South Philadelphia. Based on a design created in 1915 by Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Massachusetts, the plaza became part of the "South Broad Street Boulevard" project, which included filling in swamp land in the southern reaches of the city and creating a tree-lined boulevard linking the landscaped plaza with the new League Island Park to the south.⁴⁴ Physically, all remains of the Emancipation Exposition were erased from the landscape.

⁴² O'Leary, *To Die For*, 200–203; Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 374–76.

⁴³ *Philadelphia Tribune*, Sept. 20, 1913; *New York Age*, Sept. 25, 1913, reel 240, *Tuskegee Institute News Clippings File*.

⁴⁴ Olmsted Brothers, "General Plan of the Plaza, South Broad Street Boulevard and League Island Park" (July 1915), in Broad Street photographs, Urban Archives, Temple University.



Sesquicentennial Liberty Bell. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Instead of memorializing the event of 1913, the plaza became a site to be adapted to meet emerging commemorative needs. During the Sesquicentennial International Exposition staged on South Broad Street in 1926, for example, the plaza served as a gateway to the fair. In the center of the square, straddling Broad Street, stood a giant, steel-framed “Luminous Liberty Bell” eighty feet tall and studded with twenty-six thousand electric light bulbs.⁴⁵ The Emancipation Exposition had called attention to freedom as a consequence of the Civil War, but the enormous Liberty Bell stood as a symbol of freedom rooted in the nation’s origins in 1776. No mention was made of the Emancipation Exposition during the Sesquicentennial’s public events. Still, an African American exhibit at the Sesquicentennial echoed the earlier event’s theme of progress. The oversized Liberty Bell invited critique as well as celebration. The National Equal Rights League, founded in Philadelphia in 1908, invited African Americans “to ring Colored America’s Liberty Bell” by assembling for a

⁴⁵ *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, May 29, 1926; E. L. Austin and Odell Hauser, *The Sesquicentennial International Exposition* (Philadelphia, 1929), 67–68; Arthur P. Dudden, “The City Embraces ‘Normalcy,’ 1919–1929,” in *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, ed. Weigley, 573.



Marconi Plaza dedication. *Philadelphia Record* Photograph Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

conference devoted to fighting segregation.⁴⁶

Like the Emancipation Exposition of 1913, the Sesquicentennial disappeared quickly from the public park at Broad Street and Oregon Avenue. The Liberty Bell over Broad Street was demolished soon after the Sesquicentennial. Over the remainder of the twentieth century, the plaza acquired a new commemorative identity as a place associated with Italian American heritage. In the surge of immigration from southern and eastern Europe, Italians who came to Philadelphia settled primarily in the southern sections of the city. Today, the former site of the Emancipation Exposition honors their heritage. The space became Marconi Plaza in 1937, to memorialize the recently deceased Italian inventor of wireless telegraphy.⁴⁷ The plaza, a park with ball fields, benches, and playground

⁴⁶ Austin and Hauser, *Sesqui-Centennial*, 24; *Philadelphia Tribune*, Oct. 16, 1926.

⁴⁷ "Address of Mayor S. Davis Wilson at the Dedication of Marconi Plaza," Office of the Mayor (1936–1940), Philadelphia City Archives.

equipment, has acquired layer upon layer of Italian American memory. Plaques and statues attest to the presence of Italian American heritage in Philadelphia and the significance of this population to the city's politicians. In 1937, Mayor S. Davis Wilson placed only a small plaque naming the plaza after Marconi and noting the date of dedication. In 1955, after Democrats wrested control of city hall from the influence of the Republican organization, a much larger plaque was installed on the opposite side of Broad Street by Mayor Joseph S. Clark Jr. This larger marker praises Marconi as a "deeply religious humanitarian genius, glory of the world in Italy, and the glory of Italy in the world."⁴⁸

Marconi Plaza gained monuments to Italian heritage during the 1970s, in the same period in which Philadelphia gained an Italian American mayor, Frank Rizzo, a son of South Philadelphia. In 1976, during Rizzo's tenure, the city moved its Christopher Columbus monument from Fairmount Park in West Philadelphia to Marconi Plaza, closer to the traditional Italian American neighborhoods. The monument, a gift of the Italian people in 1876 to honor the centennial of the United States, had long been the focal point of annual Columbus Day ceremonies.⁴⁹ With the relocation of the monument, the ceremonies also relocated to Marconi Plaza, where they continue as an annual event. The original monument has been elaborated with a surrounding fence that features the outlined forms of the Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria. An additional marker also notes a renovation in 1982 under the administration of Mayor William J. Green.

Soon after Christopher Columbus took his place on Marconi Plaza, he gained a companion: Gugliermo Marconi. By the 1970s, Italian Americans had organized a Marconi Memorial Association to work on behalf of the park. The association's president, Dr. Frank P. Didio, reasoned that if the park was to have a monument to Christopher Columbus, then it must have one for Marconi himself.⁵⁰ The resulting monument, flanked by American and Italian flags, memorialized not only Marconi, but also the ties of the community and the political leadership of the 1970s. Dedicated on November 4, 1979, the monument's pedestal notes that it

⁴⁸ Plaques observed at Marconi Plaza, Jan. 26, 2002.

⁴⁹ James D. McCabe, *The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition* (Philadelphia, 1876), 334.

⁵⁰ *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Oct. 11, 1976.

was “erected by the City of Philadelphia under the leadership of Frank L. Rizzo, Mayor, and the Italo-American community organized as the Marconi Memorial Association, Incorporated, Frank P. Didio, M.D. President.”⁵¹ The memorial practices at Marconi Plaza did not end there, as the park also features the “Marcello Tenaglia Bocce Courts,” named for the Italian immigrant who served as longtime caretaker of the courts.⁵²

Clearly, the square in South Philadelphia now known as Marconi Plaza is a site of remembering and forgetting aspects of the city’s history. Scholars have often viewed such places as sites of contested memory, but this is not a case of conflict over whose memory should be perpetuated or the form and meaning of commemoration. Marconi Plaza represents an evolution more than a conscious contest. Still, we should be mindful of such evolutions, especially when they represent an obscuring of African American history. Like the Market Street site of the long-demolished home of President George Washington, now recognized as a site of slavery within Independence National Historical Park, Marconi Plaza has a longer, richer history than the existing landscape reveals.⁵³ Like the site of the President’s House, the plaza embodies entwined narratives of freedom, some rooted in slavery and others in the legacy of the nation’s founding. To these, Marconi Plaza offers the additional narrative of freedom expressed by immigrants as they negotiated their own place in the nation through events such as Columbus Day, which fuses Italian heritage and the nation’s founding. Although the Columbus Day parade in Philadelphia remains a predominantly Italian American celebration, in recent years it has been extended to a “multi-cultural event that honors all immigrants that have come to America’s shores.”⁵⁴

The recurrence of the Liberty Bell at the site of the Emancipation Exposition also attests to the continuing connection between ideas of freedom and the history of the park at Broad Street and Oregon Avenue. The famous bell originally gained prominence as a relic connected with the American Revolution, but its use as a symbol at this site in South

⁵¹ Monuments observed at Marconi Plaza, Jan. 26, 2002.

⁵² *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Sept. 7, 1978.

⁵³ On the President’s House, see Edward Lawler Jr., “The President’s House in Philadelphia: The Rediscovery of a Lost Landmark,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 126 (2002): 5–95.

⁵⁴ Quotation from Columbus Day parade announcer, Columbus Day 2002. On Italian American identity, see Stefano Luconi, *From Paesani to White Ethnics: The Italian Experience in Philadelphia* (Albany, NY, 2001).

Philadelphia adds to our understanding of the range and variability of its significance to Americans of the early twentieth century. By creating a Liberty Bell replica for the Emancipation Exposition in 1913, S. R. Simmons of Pittsburgh reunited the bell with the idea of emancipation, recalling its use as a symbol by abolitionists of the 1830s and 1840s. This is notable, because the antislavery symbolism of the Liberty Bell had fallen from public memory during the later nineteenth century, when the bell was consistently celebrated as a survival of the American Revolution.⁵⁵ The association with the Revolution was clearly on display with the giant Liberty Bell of 1926, but African Americans especially recognized a dissonance between the symbolism and their experiences. Dissonance may have been felt by immigrant groups as well, with the Sesquicentennial celebrated just two years after Congress established immigration quotas curtailing the further arrival of "new immigrant" groups, including the Italians whose heritage became celebrated on this site. When the commemoration of Italian American heritage began with the naming of Marconi Plaza, the Liberty Bell again took its place on the square. The small plaque erected in 1937, the sesquicentennial of the United States Constitution, features a Liberty Bell along with its dedication, transporting the symbol to a commemoration of the American rule of law and leaving a lasting representation of the Liberty Bell in the park.

Although similar in their striving for prosperity in American society, African Americans and Italian Americans in Philadelphia have diverged in their commemorative practices. Unlike the Emancipation Exposition of 1913—a transitory event that left few traces on the landscape or the historical record—the memorial activities of Italian Americans have left long-lasting, physical markers at the intersection of Broad Street and Oregon Avenue. In general, European ethnic groups in Philadelphia have had a greater tendency toward monument building than African Americans, whose commemorative practices have been organized predominantly around events and associational activities. This changed in the late twentieth century as African Americans pursued physical marking of their role in the city's history. As a result of concerted effort during the 1990s, state historical markers of black Philadelphia history now abound, although they often mark sites of buildings long demolished.⁵⁶ One of the

⁵⁵ Charlene Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory* (Philadelphia, 2002), 147–67.

⁵⁶ Charles L. Blockson, *Philadelphia's Guide: African-American State Historical Markers* (Philadelphia, 1992).

few monuments to African American history, the *All Wars Memorial to Colored Soldiers and Sailors* (1934), has been moved from Fairmount Park to a more prominent position on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway.⁵⁷ Images of African American history are plentiful in the city's Mural Arts Program.⁵⁸ African American history gained a significant presence in the Liberty Bell Center, opened in 2003, after public pressure persuaded Independence National Historical Park to address slavery as well as freedom in its exhibits about the history of the Liberty Bell. Work continues to commemorate the enslaved Africans who labored in George Washington's household, which stood in close proximity to the twenty-first century site of the Liberty Bell.⁵⁹

In the city of selective memory, black Philadelphians continue to commemorate emancipation, although without reference to the elaborate event of 1913. Central to the continuing memory of emancipation was Richard R. Wright Sr., the educator from Georgia who lobbied for a national exposition earlier in the century. During the 1940s, by then a Philadelphia resident, Major Wright organized "National Freedom Day," an annual event to sustain the commemoration of emancipation. Freedom Day is observed each February 1 to mark the date when Abraham Lincoln signed the congressional legislation for the Thirteenth Amendment ending slavery in the United States. For this event, African Americans assemble at a different public space—Independence National Historical Park, where they hold a short program and lay a wreath at the Liberty Bell. The commemoration celebrates the ideal of freedom, but also emphasizes that for African Americans, freedom has not been fully achieved. It is a different, less optimistic message than 1913. Like the Emancipation Exposition of 1913, it is an ephemeral event, often but not always covered by the *Philadelphia Tribune* and routinely ignored by the white media.⁶⁰ This annual commemoration is an unacknowledged

⁵⁷ Penny Balkin Bach, *Public Art in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1992), 226.

⁵⁸ Jane Golden, Robin Rice, and Monica Yant Kinney, *Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell* (Philadelphia, 2002).

⁵⁹ News coverage of these controversies over historic interpretation are archived by the Independence Hall Association at <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse>.

⁶⁰ For further history of National Freedom Day, see Charlene Mires, "The Difference This Day Makes," *Pennsylvania Heritage* (Winter 1998), 4–11; Mires, *Independence Hall*, 205–6; and Mitch Kachun, "A beacon to oppressed peoples everywhere: Major Richard R. Wright Sr., National Freedom Day, and the Rhetoric of Freedom in the 1940s," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 128 (2004): 279–306.

survival of the Emancipation Exposition, persisting quietly in the landscape of Philadelphia's historical memory, far removed in time and space from the forgotten fair.

Villanova University

CHARLENE MIRES