



MONUMENTS TO SLAVERY: COMMEMORATION AND CRITICISM

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UNIT: CONTESTED HERITAGE AND PUBLIC MEMORY, THE LEGACIES OF SLAVERY

TARGET LEVEL: Higher Education (ages 18-22)

FORMAT: Online or in-person

MATERIALS: computer, internet connection

SKILLS PROMOTED: critical thinking, historical research, thinking through writing



Ongoing debates over the presence, management, and “re-contextualization” of Confederate monuments across the southern United States have altered the nature of scholarly conversation about the commemoration of the Civil War and U.S. slavery – not least because they have drawn attention to the relative dearth of material, public monuments that remember the enslaved, and those who emancipated themselves before helping others to freedom. This lesson plan focuses on Washington, D.C.’s Freedman’s Memorial (also called the Emancipation Memorial) and responses it has elicited through the years in order to consider the role of monuments to slavery in Civil War commemoration.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Students will explore whether it is possible to commemorate slavery through conventional forms and interrogate the placement of monuments to the enslaved in civic spaces.
2. Students will learn about what, historically, monuments to the enslaved have demanded of their spectators. What kinds of community have they sought to bring into being, and how do they establish a relationship between such communities and slavery’s brutal past?
3. Students will close-read the speech given by Frederick Douglass at the dedication of the Freedman’s Memorial alongside other primary source documents to think about what the monument meant when it was created and what it means now.

KEYWORDS

Emancipation: According to the Cambridge Dictionary, emancipation is “the process of giving people social or political freedom and rights.” In the United States, as explained by the National Archives, “President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, as the nation approached its third year of bloody civil war. The proclamation declared ‘that all persons held as slaves’ within the rebellious states ‘are, and henceforward shall be free.’”

For more on the Emancipation Proclamation, see <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation#:~:text=President%20Abraham%20Lincoln%20issued%20the,and%20henceforward%20shall%20be%20free.%22>

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RESOURCES

1. Exercises at the Dedication of the Monument to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Infantry, May 31st, 1897 (Boston, MA: City Council, 1897) [<https://www.loc.gov/item/12024138/>].
2. Frederick Douglass, "Oration by Frederick Douglass, delivered on the occasion of the unveiling of the Freedmen's Monument in Memory of Abraham Lincoln, in Lincoln Park, Washington, D.C., April 14th, 1876" (1876) [text: <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/4402>]
3. Jonathan W. White and Scott Sandage, "What Frederick Douglass Had to Say About Monuments," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 30 June 2020. [<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-frederick-douglass-had-say-about-monuments-180975225/>]
4. City of Boston account of the monument and the movement to have it removed from its public location [<https://www.boston.gov/departments/arts-and-culture/emancipation-group>]

ACTIVITY

1. Before class, students should prepare to discuss the relationship between public statuary and enslavement, as it is figured in the sources you've read this week. How have monuments been used to reflect on American slavery, and to what ends? What are some of the key features of these monuments – what kind of narrative do they assert?
2. In small groups, ask students to think about what it might actually mean to "commemorate slavery." How does Douglass respond to monuments and the notion of monumentality? What does this tell us about the practice of erecting public statuary? And is the monumental form essentially incompatible with the project of commemorating slavery?
3. Using the Commemorative Cultures digital map, students can filter for monuments to emancipation. Students should choose what they consider to be one monument to slavery and prepare to present your findings to the rest of the group. This monument might not take a traditional form; it might be a material, verbal, ephemeral manifestation of remembrance. But it should be a piece that has some kind of presence within a public sphere. What is this piece made of or comprised of? Who created it, established it, circulated it, and with what funds? What facts are available about its creation – and how does it work as a visual and spatial object? What kind of presence does it have?

FURTHER READING: For more on the funding and design of the Freedman's Memorial, see Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997).



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ASSESSMENT

1. Create a short (5-7 minutes) podcast episode about the monument to slavery that you have researched. Use the podcast medium to explore how the monument was constructed and why, and what you think the monument is intended to convey. Students should listen and respond to each of the podcast episodes in order to discuss the commemoration of slavery in monuments.

2. Find a monument commemorating slavery that is not currently included in the Commemorative Cultures digital map and write a brief interpretive essay about the monument. (Remember that Commemorative Cultures construes the idea of the monument broadly, so students may wish to research sites that are not traditional statuary, like roads, lakes, trees, and so on.) Using the Submission form [<https://www.civilwarmonuments.org/submission-form/>], students can contribute their findings to the website, including any information found on the monument's creation and reception.

