

Saint John's Church recently hosted Lonnie Bunch, interviewed by David Rubinstein. Bunch showed his humorous side, in this more personal, informal setting.

Reverend Robert Fischer welcomed the White House Historical Society with some background on the church. Designed by Benjamin Latrobe, it was originally in the form of a Greek cross, with equal sides. It was expanded to its current shape in 1822, with the tower added shortly thereafter. Its bell was forged by Paul Revere's son Joseph, and is the only Revere bell in its original location. Along the line, the church is the only building on Lafayette Square still serving its original function.

When the church opened, then-President Madison was given the President's Pew, which was actually a box in those days. Unlike other churches, where a pew's prominence is its proximity to the altar, the President's Pew is near the center of the church, among the people. In 1842, when the current pews were installed, President Tyler made sure that the pew remained in place. While he, like some presidents, joined the church, it was always conceived as a house of prayer for all people. Literally.

Reverend William Hawley, 2nd rector from 1817 – 45 would baptize and marry African-American couples in his home. While we do not have all possible records, the church does have baptism and marriage registers. On January 11, 1828, Emiline and William Prates were wed at the parsonage. The next entry was John Q. Adams' son.

Lincoln would walk over to weekday evening services, alone. He would sit in the last pew on the south side, allowing him to leave just before the end of the service, for his solitary return across the park.

More recently, students from Calvin Coolidge High School, in DC, have done a podcast from the president's pew. Interest in the area has been picking up.

Steward McClaren, President of the White House Historical Association (WHHA) traces the "Slavery in the President's Neighborhood" project back to the 2016 Democratic Convention in Philadelphia. Michelle Obama had said "I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves." The WHHA historians and press office were swamped.

"We needed to do a better job," McClaren remembered. It's the People's House and we need to know about the people who built the house." Bunch volunteered his knowledge and help. The WHHA website, whitehousehistory.org, currently solicits stories and help for the project on its front page. Ironically, the Decatur House headquarters is the last building on the square with a preserved slave quarters.

Bunch did not mention finding artifacts for the National Museum of African American History and Culture (the Museum, for short) at the house. But he did describe the eleven year quest to collect the museum's artifacts. When pressed, he did admit to a book on Amazon: "A Fool's Errand: Creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the Age of Bush, Obama, and Trump".

After the Museum was authorized, he worked for 11 years to get it open, starting with virtually no staff or collections and a budget of only \$1M, gone "after a few months". So he sought donations. Of about 40,000 artifacts, 70% came from basements, trunks, and attics of peoples' homes. The museum has Nat Turner's Bible, Harriet Tubman's shawl . . .

“The one artifact he “really didn’t want” is Chuck Berry’s Candy-Apple Red Cadillac. It would be difficult to get it in the building, which would have to be modified . . . ‘shows my leadership,’ Bunch laughed.

The Museum did become “a pilgrimage site”, with 7.5 million visitors, who, on average, spend 4 ½ – 5½ hours on a typical visit, which the average for other museums is two to three. Hence the ticketing. One woman called Bunch, claiming that she had been his girlfriend in seventh grade.

He mentioned that no former seventh-grade boy would forget someone so significant . . . but she got a ticket for trying. However, no more former ‘girlfriends’ need call.

Bunch “grew up in a family that valued education”. In New Jersey, not the South. “There were people who treated my horribly, and people who treated me fairly. . . why ?” His father pointed out that history was “a way to understand myself . . . Here is an amazing tool [to help a country make itself better].”

During the Civil War anniversary commemorations of the 1960s, Bunch’s family went south, where he was surprised to see so many museums. “Can we stop at the Museum of the Confederacy, Dad?”

“No.”

Finally Bunch Sr took a detour to Washington and the Smithsonians. “Here’s the place you can learn about your past . . and not be concerned about the color of your skin.”.

Bunch maintained that from the 17th through the 19th Century, slavery was an integral part of all American culture, since it was so entwined in the economy. At the eve of the Civil War, more money was invested in slaves than in Railroads, Banking, and Commerce combined. Rubinstein called it “The Great Birth Defect of this country”.

It started later here, 1619, than in the Spanish colonies, 1550. The peculiar institution as we know it was not written into law until about 1640-1660. The US was not the largest destination for transported Africans, it accounted for about 13%. Most were brought to Brazil and more southern destinations, where harsher conditions led to more deaths. Before 1808 the U.S. brought over about 600,000 – 800,000 people.

Jefferson described slavery as ‘holding a wolf by the ear’. Let him go, and he would devour you. Hence the “paradox of liberty”: Jefferson would describe the colonists as “slaves” to the British while arguing for freedom. He used the system he understood. “Who do you unpack tht? How do you make people understand . . .“

One of Washington’s reasons for locating DC in the South is that the Three-Fifth’s clause gave that region disproportionate political power. A voter with 100 enslaved people had 61 effective votes: his free counterpart had one. He also believed that the Potomac could become the gateway to the West, of course.

About 200 enslaved people worked on James Hoban’s Executive Mansion over its eight-year construction period. Some were leased to the government and received a portion of their pay as an incentive. There were many European immigrants working on the project as well.

John Adams, the first occupant, enslaved one personally, although the staff included enslaved people. Madison and Jefferson brought their people, although not Sally Hemmings. Paul Hemmings wrote a candid book about life in the White House, in the African-American tradition of detailed accounts of enslaved life. Andrew Jackson brought his people to the house as well. One notes: his “Indian Removal” policy, inadvertently fueled the demand for the internal slave trade by opening large tracts to settlement.

Throughout the 19th century, Georgetown was primarily African American, while Washington was a predominantly, 2/3, white city. “Skipping a few insurrections”, as Rubenstein mentioned, DC imposed significant black codes as it started the transition to Chocolate City. Freed blacks, often ordered to leave surrounding states, were required to have a character reference to establish residency.

When Lincoln was elected in 1860, the District had 12,000 free African-Americans; half that number were enslaved. Once the war breaks out, many more “self-liberate”.

Lincoln grew up in an anti-slavery home; his father had been active in abolitionist churches. Yes, anti-slavery is not the same position as pro-equality, but his position shifted over time. The African - American community debated the colonization scheme for which Lincoln asked support. Some supported choice. But when mandatory deportation was proposed, opposition hardened.

Frederick Douglass met Lincoln on three occasions, and one sees Lincoln’s evolution in their arc. Yes, Douglass was skeptical after the first one. Then Douglass was at Lincoln’s Second Inaugural, and finally, Lincoln told the White House guard to admit “my friend Douglass” at the main door. Mary Todd Lincoln would present Douglass Lincoln’s walking cane to symbolize how Lincoln helped African-American progress. Neither Rubenstein nor Bunch mentioned Douglass’ speech at the dedication of the Emancipation statue in Lincoln Park in 1876, but it does summarize Douglass’ view of Lincoln’s role in liberation.

Both Lincoln and Douglass were autodidacts who learned under opposition. Thomas Lincoln considered his son’s reading a waste of time, and rented him to neighbors during dearths of chores. (One Lincoln biography quotes him saying ‘I was a slave’, in that he was rented out. Minors were considered their parents’ property.) Douglass learned to read thanks to a kind wife of one of his enslavers, and his own curiosity. Living on the Eastern Shore, he would challenge white playmates to spell a word, and then memorize their answers. Both were self-made men, who wanted to give others opportunities to do the same.

According to Bunch, legal Segregation was initially a Northern phenomenon. Places like Boston passed Black Codes, for example. What made DC different was more opportunities for employment, like Northern cities, and Howard University. It was on the forefront of pressuring the Federal Government for civil rights.

The 1963 March On Washington moved the Kennedys, who realized that MLK was someone they would have to work with. King and his supporters were surprised that “somebody from Massachusetts, with an accent they didn’t understand” would actually help get King released from jail. He had turned the Kennedys’ hearts along his arc.

John Lewes proposed that King went last because he was an impossibly hard act to follow. And that organizers wanted to give him, a young preacher not yet nationally-known, preeminence. Bunch denied the story about Mahalia Jackson urging King to “speak from the heart” to stir up a flagging au

crowd. While the written draft of “I Have a Dream” does not include that famous passage, King had said it before in various sermons.

Bunch noted that Johnson, though part of the Southern caucus, turned his political acumen and skills to civil rights because he sensed that the country had to change. His early life foreshadowed this course. He had taught at a Mexican-American school so poor Johnson had to buy soccer equipment. “He really believed that fairness was essential.”

Recommend reading includes Taylor Branch’s three-volume work on the Civil rights movement and David Blight’s Pulitzer-prize biography of Frederick Douglass. As we left the meeting, we all received Rubinstein’s “The American Story”, a collection of interviews with noted historians. It is this month’s Guild Book Club Selection.

At the Museum of African-American History and Culture, Bunch received some long-awaited recognition. His mother, at the ceremony, told him “I guess a History degree was OK.”

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