Issue Guide: Slavery or Freedom: What’s at Stake in the Kansas-Nebraska Act?

Date: June 18, 2010
Location: Richard B. Russell Library Auditorium, UGA Main Library, North Campus
Moderator: Jill Severn, Jan Levinson

Slavery or Freedom Forever: Report on an Historical Deliberation on the 145th Anniversary of Juneteenth

Report by: Jill Severn

"But, if this part of our history could be told in such a way that those chains of the past, those shackles that physically bound us together against our wills could, in the telling, become spiritual links that willingly bind us together now and into the future - then that painful Middle Passage could become, ironically, a positive connecting line to all of us whether living inside or outside the continent of Africa..."

~Tom Feelings

On Friday, June 18th, just one day shy of the 145th anniversary of the day in 1865 that slaves in Galveston, Texas learned they were free, a small group of people from the Athens community and the UGA campus gathered to reflect on the historical questions of slavery and to consider how the values that animated 19th century Americans continue to do so today.

Using the deliberative issue guide developed by Franklin Pierce University's New England Center for Civic Life in conjunction with Douglas Ley, professor of history at Franklin Pierce, moderators Chase Hagood, a doctoral student in the history program at the University of Georgia and Jill Severn, the director of the Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia (RFCLG), guided the group through a robust, candid, and passionate threshing of the ways in which the past and the present continue to intersect and shape the future.
Hagood, whose research centers on the 19th century South provided the group with a brief overview of the time period and the ideas and individuals who were at the center of the debates over slavery in the period before the Civil War erupted. This background was most welcome contextual information for the group and helped people unfamiliar with the specifics of the debates to connect with the issue.

The issue guide for the forum looks specifically at the Kansas-Nebraska proposal that repealed the Missouri Compromise and gave local settlers the right to determine whether or not slavery would be permitted, this issue guide raises three approaches considered by people in 1854 for contending with the problem of slavery and its future in the United States:

**Approach One: Remember Our Ideals:**  
Slavery is a labor system involving the most fundamental rights of human beings. Therefore, all questions involving slavery are inherently moral questions. Maintain the Missouri Compromise restriction at all costs so as to prevent any expansion of evil and immoral slavery.

**Approach Two: Affirm Individual Choice**  
Questions concerning slavery are political in nature. Slavery is a divisive issue and threatens to split the national political parties and even divide the nation itself. Give the local settlers the right to decide and remove the issue of slavery from the national arena.

**Approach Three: Protect Our Prosperity**  
Decisions regarding slavery should be based on economic considerations, since they affect everyone’s access to new lands and to economic resources. We need to focus on the nation’s economic well-being and ensure the development of a strong and prosperous society.

To get familiar with each other and to begin to talk about the relationships of past and present the moderators asked the group if there were modern day issues that echoed the complex set of problems associated with slavery. Participants mentioned immigration, abortion, LGBT rights, and the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico as modern analogues that each had passionate supporters and opponents, lots of tradeoffs, and significant areas of ambivalence. Some participants also suggested that the growing conflation of morality and religion by many in the U.S. as well as the economic, social, and political divisions engendered by the increasing diversity of the modern U.S. also raised similar challenges and tradeoffs and passions to 19th century citizens grappling with slavery as an economic, political, moral, and social problem. The group also took some time to reflect on what brought them to an historical forum. To spur conversation the moderators asked, “Why should we be discussing slavery now, why does the issue matter today?” The group was quick to weigh in with examples of the ways in which the legacy of slavery continues to shape lives, politics, and policy in the present, but one person homed in on a point about the value of historical consideration as a method for talking about sensitive and difficult constellation of issues related to racial oppression and discrimination. She said, “I’ve been to a lot discussions about race, racism, diversity and so on, but I’ve never been to a forum on slavery.” She went on to explain that slavery remains a topic that whites and blacks in the U.S. find hard to discuss
together in an authentic way, and that discussions about modern racism or diversity issues although fraught with their own challenges tend to be the focus of dialogue. The group then moved to try to attempt an authentic deliberation of this challenging topic.

The first approach’s focus on the moral arguments for and against slavery sparked a long and vigorous dialogue among participants. The group began by discussing who chose to see slavery chiefly if not solely as a moral wrong and who chose to see it as a moral right. Quakers, Unitarians, free blacks, abolitionists, those who believed in the Golden Rule were among those mentioned by participants as strong opponents to slavery. The forum group didn’t spend as much time enumerating who saw slavery as a moral good, but instead looked at the religious and racial inferiority bases that 19th century proponents adopted for this position. From this point the real focus of this approach centered on the question of what role morality should play in shaping policy and accomplishing change. If morality drives approaches to complex societal problems, what is gained and what is lost, and what are the tradeoffs? If those who see a problem in essentially moral terms there is often little room for compromise—something is right or wrong. Some participants felt that such a position can provide clarity on an issue and affirm deeply-held beliefs and values, but some also acknowledged that complex problems often require some compromise to achieve change without series crises or disruptions. Others felt that sometimes crises and disruptions were acceptable if compromise would mean violating deeply held beliefs about right and wrong. The conversation turned to the example of John Brown, a radical white antislavery activist who in 1859 tried to start a start a liberation movement among enslaved African Americans in Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia) and was subsequently hanged for this act. Agreeing with Brown’s position, one of the forum participants argued passionately that ownership of human beings cannot be considered outside of morality. “It’s just wrong!” she said. So, in the case of this historical forum on slavery, some felt that although the Civil War was terrible, it was an acceptable consequence if it ended slavery. A forum participant ended the discussion of this approach by asking the group, “What will folks think of our actions 150 years from now? How will our actions be judged?”

The group moved to consider the second approach which treats slavery as an essentially political problem to solve. The approach advocates self determination by states, which some in the group pointed out continues to be a tactic supported and employed by many factions today such as immigration, health care, and previously in regard to desegregation. Those in the forum who valued this approach did so because they believed that the rule of law is a pillar of a free society or nation. Some in the group argued that a robust political system can break the gridlock of opposing moral positions and move the sides closer to solving the problem. Some also acknowledged that compromise inherent in political solutions is vulnerable to corruption and advancing self interest. Integral to the thinking of those who favored this approach was a belief that compromise that achieves progress has greater value than a stalemate of factions driven by an uncompromising morality even if corruption and self interest sometimes taint the process and the outcomes. The big picture of progress over perfection drives fans of this position. Opponents in the group who favored approach one and saw slavery as a moral evil, viewed this political solution to slavery as “a house built on sand—and an effort to fix something that should never have existed in the first place.” As with the last approach, the group
ended the deliberation with a question, “What does it mean if we cannot find a political solution to our most difficult problems?”

The third approach sees the problem of slavery and the approach to solving it in economic terms. This approach argues that decisions regarding slavery should be based on economic considerations, since they affect everyone’s access to new lands and to economic resources. Proponents of American slavery emphasized the benign paternalistic relationship of owner to slave and the tremendous productive value of the main crop grown by slaves, cotton, to the U. S. economy. Opponents of this view argued that the existence of slavery devalued the work of the wage laborer, which was the true engine of American economic success. In play for both groups was the future of slavery in new states in the west. Both factions saw their opponent’s economic system as a threat to the economic potential of these new areas. Participants in the forum saw a correlation with this economic emphasis with discussions around free trade, NAFTA, and tariffs. Some also saw the broad strokes of the battle over energy policy in the U. S. as a battle of economic interests vs. moral interests, but also a complex mix of moral ideals and economic interests on all sides of the issue.

Although many in the forum group acknowledged the economic imperative of slavery to those who held slaves and those who benefitted from their labor directly and indirectly across the country in the years before the Civil War, few saw decisions based on economy as viable and acceptable solutions to the problem of slavery in the 1850s and to more modern problems such as segregation or immigration or access to fossil fuels. Though everyone in the group acknowledged that economic decisions have driven and continue to drive policy in the United States and in other places, they also voiced that such an emphasis without acknowledgement of the moral underpinnings and self interest in play in most economic decisions often engender their own set of new problems, tradeoffs, and consequences. As one participant in the forum pointed out about those who would benefit, “Who is the ‘everyone’ who should/would have access to new land? Certainly, not slaves!” We almost never make decisions that are simply economic decisions; they are usually tied to politics and morality or beliefs. Participants also noted that many people now and in the past have to grapple with their own contradictions of belief, values, and economic interests. Choosing how to respond to the Gulf oil spill crisis was a prime example of the ambivalence these contradictions create. One participant noted, “I hate our dependence on oil, but I still have to drive my car that is powered by gasoline and heat and cool my home with natural gas.” Others noted that many who work in the gulf area affected by the spill still want drilling to continue despite the harm the spill has done to their own livelihood.

In reflecting on this historical deliberation many at the forum expressed that grappling with the fundamental values that animated debates around slavery helped them to clarify their relationship with these fundamental values today. Some acknowledged a greater realization of the importance of moral judgments in their decision-making process and a strong rejection of compromise to achieve progress. Others acknowledged that value of compromise to achieve common goals.
We as moderators, both trained as historians, wanted to wrap up the forum by asking participants to mull the value of history to present-day concerns. We asked, “Does history matter?” The consensus of the group was that history does matter, but that it is underused and underappreciated by many people living today. Those who spoke acknowledged the potential of history to give people perspective and greater understanding of the present. Sometimes looking back allows us to see great progress in tackling problems; sometimes it reminds us that much more needs to be done and points the way forward. All agreed that teachers, parents, and cultural resource managers (curators, librarians, and archivists) could do more to engage audiences in a more accessible and useful dialogue with the past.

One project that the Russell Forum hopes to pursue to achieve this goal is to develop more historically-framed National Issues Forums issue guides based on the great resources in the archives.

One of the forum attendees, a PhD student in the history department, Daleah Goodwin shared a remarkable statement that she committed to memory about the meaning of history. These words offer a fitting close to what was a remarkable forum:

*History is a clock that tells a people their political and cultural time of day. It is a compass that people use to locate themselves on the map of human geography. History tells a people who they are and what they are. Where they have been and what they have been. Most importantly, history tells a people where they still must go and what they still must be.*

~John Henrik Clarke

**About John Henrik Clarke...**

John Henrik Clarke was a Pan-Africanist American writer, historian, professor, and a pioneer in the creation of Africana studies and professional institutions in academia starting in the late 1960s. He was Professor of African World History and in 1969 founding chairman of the Department of Black and Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College of the City University of New York. He also was the Carter G. Woodson Distinguished Visiting Professor of African History at Cornell University’s Africana Studies and Research Center. In 1968 along with the Black Caucus of the African Studies Association, Clarke founded the African Heritage Studies Association.