HISTORY DENIED

Recovering South Carolina's Stolen Past

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This is a cautionary tale. It centers on the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), a militant, interracial youth movement that thrived against all odds between 1937 and 1949 in the Jim Crow South. Its rise and fall—and the collective amnesia that followed—offers a timely warning about how history is made and unmade, and how that shapes our shared narrative.

While SNYC was based in Birmingham, AL, South Carolina activists played a key role in SNYC’s unlikely success. Early on, Columbia activist Modejska Monteith Simkins served on its board, and was instrumental in bringing SNYC’s 7th annual conference to Columbia in October 1946.

The three-day event promised a glittering line-up of distinguished speakers—including keynote W.E.B. DuBois and internationally acclaimed Paul Robeson—as well as invited guests from around the world. The ambitious schedule included daytime workshops to hone the organizing skills of the young delegates.

It was an unprecedented gathering, yet one that has largely been forgotten. Only recently has scholarship on the radical human rights movement in the 1930s and 40s emerged, enriching our understanding of the people who drove it and the critical ground they laid for those who came later.

SNYC is far from the only chapter of history to be whitewashed, distorted, or erased altogether. This booklet offers a few South Carolina examples: the first Memorial Day, celebrated in war-ruined Charleston after Confederates evacuated the city in 1865; the radically democratic experiment that was Reconstruction; the widespread practice of lynchings after Reconstruction’s end; and the conspiracy of silence that followed the 1934 killings of seven striking textile workers in Honea Path.

It is no accident that we don’t know our labor history or the darkest truths about the white supremacy built into South Carolina’s very constitution, and that denial carries lasting consequences. Ignorance comes with a heavy price.

This booklet is an attempt to broaden our view of the past, even if it hurts. These stories are painful, but they are also heroic. For every act of oppression, there have been acts of resistance by people willing to risk their very lives to stand for human dignity and the promise upon which this country was built. Their struggles and triumphs deserve to be shared, their bravery celebrated, their work continued.

This volume is not a comprehensive telling of South Carolina’s forgotten resisters. The voices and contributions of women, workers, Native tribes, LGBTQ+ Americans, immigrants, and other marginalized communities also are missing or minimized in our textbooks and in the mainstream media. This is simply a reminder that what we’ve been taught has largely been dominated by money, war, and the experiences of white men of privilege. That cheats a whole lot of citizens from knowing that their ancestors played important roles in the making of this state and nation.

SNYC’s story lays bare the very best and worst of America. We’d be wise to know both.

Becchi Robbins
Communications Director, SC Progressive Network
The Rise, Fall, and Disappearance of the Southern Negro Youth Congress

“We have come here to Columbia—in the heart of South Carolina, in the heart of the deep South—to re-arm ourselves with a deeper realization of our condition and our needs. We have come to give voice and strength and organizational power to the burning and unsilenceable demand of our generation for the right to live and prosper.

“Today, the movement of the new South, for people’s livelihood, decency of human relations, and democracy was foreshadowed in the glorious achievements of the Reconstruction period, when white men and black men shared political power in true representative state governments, and administered wisely and progressively in the interest of the whole people.”

Columbia had never seen anything like it. This was, after all, the Jim Crow South in the Forties. Named for a 1930s minstrel character, “Jim Crow” was shorthand for a code of conduct that adhered to a strictly enforced color line. For three-quarters of a century in the American South, a caste system racially segregated schools, churches, parks, trains, buses, and restaurants. Public facilities were marked with signs reading “white” and “colored.”

Racial tensions were running high the fall that SNYC held its 7th conference in Columbia, openly defying the state’s segregation laws. The mood was electric inside the packed Township Auditorium on opening night as black delegates representing the Confederate states marched into the hall and assembled on stage under a giant American flag.

“We are meeting at a most crucial hour in the history of the world,” Ed Strong told the crowd. One of SNYC’s founders and its first executive secretary, Strong spoke with the urgency of a man just returned from war. “Those of us who had the opportunity and responsibility of serving in the armed forces were able to travel the world,” he said. “Everywhere we went, we discovered that there is a common bond that binds all mankind. That is the common aspiration for human freedom.”

“In the most titanic battle that the world has ever seen,” Strong said, “we had one view in mind—and that was to realize democracy for us all. When we think of the contrast between what we fought for and the reality of our everyday life in this country, then surely we must begin to realize that something is wrong.”

That theme—of black Americans fighting for democracy overseas only to be denied it upon their return home—was recurring throughout the weekend. By the 1946 conference in Columbia, SNYC had matured into a disciplined and politically savvy organization. Members were focused, driven by a clear vision of an America that lived up to its promise and a South free of its institutional bigotry.

SNYC organizers had planned an ambitious program for delegates and the broader public, promising a distinguished line-up of speakers—most notably the internationally acclaimed Paul Robeson, senior statesman Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, historian Dr. Herbert Aptheker, and Dr. Clark Foreman. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell cancelled at the last minute, claiming...
to have fallen ill. (That may be true, but correspondence shows the high-profile lawmaker asking for more in speaking fees than the cash-strapped organization was able to pay. In his absence, Columbia activist Modjeska Monteith Simkins read Powell’s speech.)

Foreman, the white president of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, spoke on opening night. Looking out at the diverse crowd, he asked the delegates to work across racial and class barriers to create a united front. “In this fight for democracy no one can sit idly by,” he said. “Wherever you are, seek out those people of both races who are willing to stand up for their rights, and join with them in the fight.”

“The rising tide of fascism in the South must be turned back before it has the chance to engulf the whole nation. Unfortunately, slavery has not disappeared from the South. Not only the Negroes, but the whites as well are enslaved.” (Read more of Foreman’s speech on page 14.)

During the day, delegates met for “committee hearings” on voting, education, civil liberties, veteran affairs, and organized labor. Delegates were invited to convene “in the tradition of our forefathers who assembled in great peoples conventions after the Civil War to draft model legislation for their full emancipation from slavery, and to memorialize, petition and demand its enactment into law by state and federal governments.”

Among the documents they drafted in Columbia was the Pact of Southern Youth. (See inside back cover.)

On Saturday night, Robeson took the stage to speak to a rapt audience. He talked about his son, then the same age as many of the students in the audience, and connected the dots between oppressed people around the globe. “There is a great responsibility upon all of us here,” he said in his booming voice. “It is our great destiny to be the vanguard in this struggle, the forward place for courage, for fighting.” (See more of his speech on page 9.)

Robeson had just been in the nation’s capital a few weeks earlier as part of the American Crusade to End Lynching, a 100-day campaign to mobilize support for federal anti-lynching legislation. While there, he met with President Harry Truman to solicit his leadership on the matter, and performed at a mass rally in the pouring rain.

Robeson treated the audience to a half-dozen songs, including “Old Man River,” “Go Down Moses,” and a song mourning the murder of union activist Joe Hill. He told the audience to remember his name, as he was a martyr for a shared cause. “One must understand the unity of the struggle,” Robeson said. “We are laboring people. We come from toiling masses and have always been allies with the toiling groups throughout the world.”

It was a rare show, as Robeson, who refused to play to segregated audiences, was performing for just the second time in the South.

Sharing the stage that evening was Howard Fast, the white author of the novel Freedom Road, set in post-Civil War South Carolina. The book’s lead protagonist is formerly enslaved Gideon, who becomes involved in the Union Army and a ride along in a black action. He was told they would never let it play in the South, Fast told a reporter.

The book was beloved among SNYC’s members. Its newspaper, Cavalcade, awarded prizes to college students for art and poetic interpretations of Freedom Road. Having Fast at the Columbia conference was a real draw. Upon the author’s acceptance to speak, SNYC organizer Louis Burnham wrote an enthusiastic letter of thanks and an outline of program details. Fast was to speak about his novel and “the people’s culture as a weapon in the fight against fascist reaction, American style.”

Fast’s book would be for sale at the conference, with proceeds being dedicated to support the movement. We want to see an end to “white supremacy” customs and practices which violate our human dignity and rights.

From invitation to delegates of SNYC’s Columbia conference
I went to a convention in Columbia, SC, and this was the first time blacks had occupied the city auditorium of that city even though it was majority black. The convention had around the walls pictures of all the blacks who had been black congressmen and mayors of cities during Reconstruction. I did not know there had been black congressmen and mayors of cities during Reconstruction in the South.

So it was a great educational experience with the Southern Negro Youth Congress.

Jack O'Dell, activist who would go on to serve as top aide to Martin Luther King

"We black people didn’t have no mass organization in the South before [SNVC]. Police shot down a Negro, it’s just a Negro shot down. Some may have grumbled among themselves, but nobody said nothing."

Hosea Hudson, union organizer

I have no mass organization in the South. We black people didn’t say nothin’. But nobody down. Some may have shoot down a Negro, and more people spilled outside, where they listened over loudspeakers.

"The future of the American Negro is in the South," he began. "Here, 327 years ago, they began to enter what is now the United States. Here they have suffered the damnation of slavery, the frustration of Reconstruction and the lynching of emancipation. I trust then that an organization like yours is going to regard the South as the battlefield of a great crusade."

DuBois took on South Carolina’s most famous politician since John C. Calhoun, former US senator, Supreme Court justice and future governor James F. Byrnes, “thatfavorite son of this commonwealth, today occupying an indefensible and impossible position. And if he survives in the memory of men, he must begin to help establish a new order of things in which men of any color may take their respective places with dignity.”

A. Rumeis Hottum brought greetings from Liberia. “You have come a long way up from slavery to where you are,” he told the crowd. “You have made much and wonderful progress. We congratulate you upon your effort, upon your courage and determination, upon your success so far. Let us work together. Let us share what we have with each other. We are brothers.”

DuBois brought the convention to a memorable conclusion on Sunday evening in Benedict College’s Amistad chapel. A reverent crowd filled the pews and aisles of the church, and more people spilled outside, where they listened over loudspeakers.

The venerable actor, singer, and activist Paul Robeson headlined the Columbia conference in 1946. These are his remarks, edited for space.

“I am proud and happy to be here. I come to one who feels very close and proud and very thankful to you as I look out at you tonight, because I have a boy, reared a good deal abroad, who is back in his land to fight for his people. He knows that it is for you here in the South that the struggle really goes on. Here you must bear it day by day. I shall be proud to tell him that I have seen your faces tonight and that there are a lot of youngsters his age who are fighting for him every day.

One must understand the unity of the struggle. We are laboring people. We come from toiling masses, and have always been allies with the toiling groups throughout the world. There was one guy who fought for you, whether you know it or not, way back some time ago. He came from Salt Lake City, and they shot him down in Colorado. His name was Joe Hill. Remember that.

What we see in the South is not an isolated thing. It is a part of the whole fabric of America. Let’s go back just a few years to the New Deal, when Roosevelt said that one-third of the American people is underprivileged. He meant that they were living a life that had nothing to do with the level of living that could be and should be theirs in a country as rich as ours.

Not only the Negro people, who make up one-tenth of the United States, but one-third of the workers of many nationalities, white workers in the South, Spanish-American workers in the Southwest, Americans of Asiatic descent on the West Coast, all denied the privileges that should belong to us as American citizens. These same people who would crash democracy abroad would break organized labor in the United States.

They would break the Negro people who have aspirations for real freedom and who have an innate power to attain that freedom. They would break the back of other minorities like the Jewish people, the Spanish-American people. Yes, they must break all minorities. There is no connection made between Nuremberg trials and lynchings in Georgia and in other parts of the South. One of the weaknesses of Mr. Byrnes’ position in Paris has been exactly that.

The United States has no moral position whatsoever in the council of nations to talk about the extension of democracy until they can see that it has some relation to the dignity of millions and millions of Americans who up until now have had little part in this so-called free land. It is still a battle of fascism against anti-fascism. We must understand that in other parts of the world today our government has, up to this point, decided to throw its weight on the side of the remnants of fascism against the emerging democracies of the world.

They do it in many ways. One way is to make everybody a little nervous. Our reactionaries say, “We have to go to war against the Soviet Union.” Anything that is red, anything that is Communist, we have just got to destroy. Now what is the history of this? Communism didn’t begin in Russia. It comes from the struggle of people to get a decent life. This happened in 1917 in Russia just as it happened in 1775 here or 1789 in France; just as it happened in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia during this war. It gets a little absurd today to worry about the “Communist menace.” Communists have been in power in many countries because they were the first to die in the struggle against fascism. Behind this red bogy that Hitler used, there is the hope of scaring away every liberal from fighting for the rights of oppressed peoples. But the American liberal must understand that it is too late to go now. I saw this happen in France. First they attacked minorities like the Negro people and the Jewish people. Next, they called everybody a Communist, and before you knew it the jails were filled. This is the essence of fascism.

So there is a great responsibility upon all of us here. It is our great destiny to be the vanguard in this struggle, the forward place for courage, for fighting. Suffering belongs to us, the Negro people together with many others, with labor, and with other minorities. We have been challenged.

With our allies here and in other parts of the world, we will gain our freedom. There are no more dignified and prouder people than our forefathers in Africa who were brought as slaves to America. Human dignity is important to us. We want to walk the earth with our shoulders back, knowing that we are free, free like any other people on the face of the earth. Thanks to you and to many others, we will be.
Behold the Land

W.E.B. DuBois delivered this address at the closing session of the SONYC conference in Columbia. It was later printed as a booklet and distributed widely. The piece also was reprinted in Freedomways, the black journal Esther Cooper helped launch in 1961 and edited until 1985.

The future of American Negroes is in the South. Here 327 years ago, the world saw what is now the United States of America; here they have made their greatest contribution to American culture; and here they have suffered the damnation of slavery, the frustration of reconstruction and the lynching of emancipation.

I trust then that an organization like yours is going to regard the South as the battle-ground of a great crusade. Here is the fruitful earth of the South; it is the end of a long series of men whose eternal damnation is the fact that they looked truth in the face and did not see it; John C. Calhoun, Wade Hampton, Ben Tillman are men whose names must ever be besmirched by the fact that they fought against freedom, and democracy in a land which was founded upon democracy and freedom.

Eventually this class of men must yield to the writing in the stars. That great hypocrite, Jan Smuts, who today is talking of humanity and standing beside Bynes for a United Nations, is at the same time oppressing the Black people of Africa to an extent which makes their two countries, South Africa and the American South, the most reactionary peoples on earth, peoples whose exploitation of the poor and helpless reaches the last degree of shame. They must in the long run yield to the forward march of civilization or die.

The more they try to escape it, the more they land into hypocrisy, lying and double dealing; the more they bend what they least wish to become, the oppressors and despisers of human beings. Some of them, in larger and larger numbers, are bound to turn every effort is made toward the white people in the South to count you out of citizenship and to act as though you did not exist as human beings while all the time they are profiting by your labor, gleaning wealth from your sacrifices and trying to build a nation and a civilization upon your degradation. You must remember that despite all this, you have allies and allies even in the white South. They have been led foolishly to look upon you as the cause of most of their distress. You must remember that this attitude is hereditary from slavery and that it has been deliberately cultivated ever since emancipation.

First and greatest of these possible allies are the white working classes, that have been taught to despise and go in turn have learned to fear and hate you. This must not deter you from efforts to get at the truth, because in the past in their ignorance and suffering they have been led foolishly to look upon you as the cause of most of their distress. You must remember that this attitude is hereditary from slavery and that it has been deliberately cultivated ever since emancipation.

Finally even the politicians must eventually recognize the trend in the world, in this country, and in the South. James Byrnes, that favorite son of this commonwealth, and Secretary of the State of the United States, is today occupying an indefensible and impossible position; and if he survives in the memory of men, he must begin to help establish in his own state something of that democracy which he has been recently so loudly preaching to Russia.

He is the end of a long series of men whose eternal damnation is the fact that they looked truth in the face and did not see it; John C. Calhoun, Wade Hampton, Ben Tillman are men whose names must ever be besmirched by the fact that they fought against freedom, and democracy in a land which was founded upon democracy and freedom.

What Does the Fight Mean?

If now you young people, instead of running away from the battle here in Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi, instead of being underestimated because in the past in their ignorance and suffering they have been led foolishly to look upon you as the cause of most of their distress. You must remember that this attitude is hereditary from slavery and that it has been deliberately cultivated ever since emancipation. New York—which do spell opportunity—nevertheless grit your teeth and make up your minds to fight it out right here if it takes every day of your lives and the lives of your children’s children. If you do this, you must in meetings like this ask yourselves what does the fight mean? How can it be carried on? What are the best tools, arms, and methods? And where does it lead?

I should be the last to insist that the uplift of mankind never calls for force and death. There are times, as both you and I know, when ‘Tho’ love repine and reason chafe, ’Tis man’s perdition to be safe. When for truth he ought to die. At the same time and even more clearly in a day like this, after the millions of mass murders that have been done in the world since 1914, we ought to be the last to believe that force is ever the final word. We cannot escape the clear fact that what is going to win in this world is reason if it ever becomes a reasonable world.

The careful reasoning of the human mind backed by the facts of science is the one salvation of man. The world, if it resumes its march toward civilization, cannot ignore reason. This has been the tragedy of the South in the past; it is still its awful and unforgiving sin that it has set its face against reason and against the fact. It tried to build slavery upon freedom; it tried to build tyranny upon democracy; it tried to build mob violence on law and law on lynching, colors reaches the last degree of shame. They must in the long run yield to the forward march of civilization or die. Eventually this class of men must yield to the writing in the stars. That great hypocrite, Jan Smuts, who today is talking of humanity and standing beside Bynes for a United Nations, is at the same time oppressing the Black people of Africa to an extent which makes their two countries, South Africa and the American South, the most reactionary peoples on earth, peoples whose exploitation of the poor and helpless reaches the last degree of shame. They must in the long run yield to the forward march of civilization or die.

The more they try to escape it, the more they land into hypocrisy, lying and double dealing; the more they bend what they least wish to become, the oppressors and despisers of human beings. Some of them, in larger and larger numbers, are bound to turn every effort is made toward the truth and to recognize you as brothers and sisters, as fellow travelers toward the dawn. There has always been in the South that intellectual elite who saw
The oil and sulfur; the coal and iron; the cotton and corn; the lumber and steel. These are the work- ers, Black and white, and not to the thieves who hold them and use them to enslave you. They can be rescued and restored to the people if you have the guts to strive for the real right to vote, the right to real education, the right of happiness and health and the total abo-

The arts were central to SNYC’s organizing strategy, a criti-

Culture as a Weapon

or freedom and health and the total abolition of the father of these scoundrels of mankind, poverty.

Many of Cuney’s pieces were anti-

In 1941, SNYC launched a monthly newsletter, Callavaca: The March of Southern Youth. The publication was buy and for the black youth in the South, filling a void for that demographic. Its editor, Augusta Jackson, featured seasoned as well as new writers and poets, critical essays, and political commentary.

In its first year, in 1947, SNYC opened a People’s Theater in Richmond, VA, and another in New Orleans, LA, where they staged plays and show-
cased musicians. In places where they didn’t have a community theater, they performed skits in churches and recre-
tion centers to teach black history, promote civic engagement, and ad-

While the troupe was entertaining and educating marginalized communities, they also were gathering important data from the field. They reported, for instance, that most of the farmers lived at least 20 miles from any school, too far to reach on foot. That led to a collaboration with black colleges to bring books to people who lacked access to them.

The Puppeters’ were instrumental in freeing Nora Wilson, a black teen jailed in Alabama for curing a white woman—charges the accuser later wanted dropped. Wilson’s mother contacted the Puppeters to ask for help in securing her daughter’s release from the eight-month sentence.

Nora Wilson’s crime was coming to the defense of her 11-year-old sister, accused of stealing six ears of corn while working in the home of a white family. When Wilson confronted the employer, she was slapped and threat-

The skills SNYC activists honed in their years of service would serve them in their years of involvement in Vietnam. Esther Cooper would go on to work in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Others put their talents to work at home. Erica Cooper would help launch Freedomways, a journal she edited from 1961 until it folded in 1985. A leading repository for black artists and intellectuals, Freedomways ran pieces by notable black writers and think-

The public attention cast an unwel-

Many of Cuney’s pieces were anti-

_When I went to camp_ I found the same Jim Crow.

_Lucullus says,_ man whose death shall find in Victory’s splendor._ But I know a happier one: he who fights in despair and in defeat still fights. Singing with

_Once, a great German poet cried:_

_This pool that once the angels troubled_ awake.

_Above the mulberry trees;_

_"I thought I saw an angel flying low, I thought I saw the flier of a wing Above the mulberry trees; but not again, Bethesda sleeps. This ancient pool that healed. A host of bearded Jews does not awake._

_Noir angel stirs it now, no Saviour comes_ With healing in His hands to raise the sick and bid the lame man leap upon the ground. The golden days are gone. Why do we wait_ so long upon the marble steps, blood falling from our open wounds? and why do our black faces search the empty sky? Is there something we have forgotten? Some precious thing we have lost, wandering in strange lands?_ There was a day, I remember now, for my breast and cried, “Wash me God.” Wash me with a wave of wind upon The barley: Quite one, draw near, draw near!_ Walk upon the hills with lovely feet And in the waistfull stand and speak!_
“Slavery has not disappeared from the South”

Speech by Dr. Clark Foreman, Presi- dent of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, at SNYC’s 1946 con- ference in Columbia. Modjeska Simkins attended the founding conference of SCHW in 1938, when First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt famously refused to take segregated seating. Like SNYC, the group dissolved in 1948 due to red baiting. Simkins spoke at the 51st anniversary of the group’s founding in 1990 in Birmingham.

Nearly 300 years ago, Pierre Robert, my grandfather 10 genera- tions back, settled in what is now the state of South Carolina to escape the persecution of Protestants which was then prevailing in France. As the first Huguenot minister in America, Pierre Robert came to build a free country, where all people, of whatever faith or origin, could live in harmony, free from the persecutions of the old world.

Thousands of other early settlers in the South set out to make this country free and democratic. Freedom and liberty are just as important in the heritage of the South as the puritan tradition in New England. The best Southerners have always been true to that tradition of freedom.

The freedom and liberty-loving South- erners were overwhelmed several genera- tions ago by the growing power of the small minority of plantation- owners. We were pushed into slavery and secession by these big-business- men of the old South because then, as now, the majority of the people of the South were not allowed to vote.

The period of slavery, secession and bloody civil war would not be in our history books today if all the Southerners had had the vote in the 1700s and 1800s. So long as a handful of people are allowed to speak for an entire state, we shall not have democracy in the 1900s. Sooner than the South elect their own officials and have a real voice in the running of their government, the better off the South and the whole nation will be.

The recent post-war wave of lynching and terror has focused the eyes of the nation on the corruption of much of our democratic machinery in the South. Almost without exception the victims of lynching have been guilty only of standing up for their rights.

Just as the plantation owners profited from slavery in the South that many Americans like to think is a thing of the past, their present-day successors still hope for greater profits through labor at little better than slave prices.

Unfortunately, slavery has not disap- peared from the South. One look into the Southern part of the United States will tell any observer that now not only the Negroes, but the whites as well, are enslaved. Enslaved to a system of taxation without representation, enslaved to a system which knows little economic security, enslaved to a combination of Northern industrial overseers and modern plantation owners whose Simon Legrees are Bomax and Talmadges, and their tools among the police who shoot up Negro communities as in Columbia, Tennes- see, or wink at lynching as in Monroe, Georgia, or who gouge out the eyes of a Negro veteran as in Batesburg, South Carolina.

The rulers of this feudal minority can call upon money from the North and the South to maintain their control. They can buy a large corrupt segment of the press. Wherever the masses of the people are unable to vote, their rulers can buy into office their state, county and municipal officials and even legislators in Washington.

They can also confuse many people by spreading false information and inflaming prejudice. These feudalists endanger the whole country, because then as now the minority of plantation-owners whose Simon Legrees are the trial overseers and modern plantation owners whose Simon Legrees are the Southern mill owners who think of the South unorganized and working for low salaries.

Roosevelt’s words are just as true in the South as in the North. Economically and politically the low standards of the South must be turned back before it has the chance to engulf the whole nation.
in his own South Carolina something of that democracy which he has been recently so loudly preaching in Russia. Eventually this class of men must yield to the writing in the stars.”

The speech held the crowd spellbound. Regarded as one of DuBois’ finest, “Behold the Land” was printed and distributed widely. (See full speech on page 10.)

**Media Matters**

Coverage of the Columbia conference in The State quoted Gov. Ransom Wilson, who said, “It was regrettable that Communist elements came so boldly and brazenly into South Carolina in an effort to undermine Sec. of State Byrnes.” It included an editor’s note: “Outing Byrnes is now the No. 1 item on the Communist program.”

The paper ran two pieces side by side; one clearly taken from a press release, as it reported that Congressman Powell spoke and his wife played two numbers on the piano.

Under the headline “Foreman Sees ‘Rising Tide Of Fascism,’” the paper quoted the keynote address at length, describing how he “blazed away” at a litany of social ills. It reported that speaker John McCray, editor of The Lighthouse and Informer, “lashed out” at South Carolina titans Wade Hampton, John C. Calhoun, Ben Tillman, Olin D. Johnston, and “Cotton Ed” Smith.

The Columbia Record ran a story under the headline “Russia Is Praised at Negro Meeting.” An editorial in the Beaufort Gazette chided SNYC for vilifying “the names of such great South Carolinians” Calhoun, Tillman, Smith, and Byrnes. Even the New York Times disapproved of SNYC’s antipathy toward Byrnes, claiming it “revealed the degree to which the Communist Party has been able to guide the actions of the conference.”

The mainstream press was a willing accomplice to the segregation espoused by Byrnes and most politicians in the South. It was easier to decry the social activists as communist dupes of an outside agitating force than to address the problems of black Americans’ lack of access to decent jobs, education, and health care.

SNYC pushed back, issuing a press release defending their resolution condemning Byrnes. Foreign and domestic policies are inseparable, SNYC argued, and “our relations with other powers cannot be entrusted to those who represent the most backward and undemocratic policies in internal affairs.”

The Columbia conference was a high-water mark for SNYC. Attendance was double that of the previous convention, reflecting a movement gaining strength. After the conference, students channelled their enthusiasm into establishing councils, or clubs, across South Carolina.

At least 15 members were required to charter a SNYC group. Students organized in Aiken, Irmo, Anderson, Monks Corner, Columbia, Orangeburg, Pelzer, Huger, Hardeeville, Winnboro, Seneca, and Andrews, as well as on the campuses of Allen University and Harbison Agricultural Institute. New members received a letter saying “You have just joined a crusade for overseas. “I wrote Mr. Truman the other day about the same thing. We fought together like one, why can’t we be like one.” How ever he hasn’t answered me back yet but I hope I will hear from him soon. I do not think I am too young to help fight to keep up our Negro race. I will like very much to be in you all mits. [sic]”

**Growing a Southern Youth Movement**

The activists driving SNYC had come a long way in less than a decade, fuelled by a youthful idealism and a shared belief in their power to effect change.

SNYC was an outgrowth of the National Negro Congress (NRC), founded in 1936 in Chicago as an umbrella organization seeking to unite various civil rights groups and personalities. That gathering drew more than 800
SNYC’s founding resolution brimmed with hope. “We…realizing the vast possibilities in the millions of young people, unawakened and uninformed; the disinherited sharecropper, the tenant farmer, the workers of the field, young people whose future outlook is one of monotonous toil without any hope of security or happiness, resolved that we cast our lot with Southern black youth specifically and blacks generally. In the heady context of the wide-ranging social activism spawned by the Depression and the gathering clouds of European war, youth activism mushrooms, especially among clouds of European war, youth activists were part of this yeasty movement. SNYC’s founders and activists were part of this yeasty movement.”

SNYC held its first conference in Richmond, VA, Feb. 13–14, 1937, to coincide with Frederick Douglass’ birthday. The keynote address was delivered by the distinguished theologian Dr. Mordecai Johnson, the first black president of Howard University in Washington, DC. Johnson told the audience of some 1,200, “Do not deceive yourself. It is not sufficient to intellectually recognize evils, talk about them, fuss about them and cuss people out who are responsible for them. You must go deeper than that. Unless you are able to see that the wrong you see around you is wrong because it hurts the universe itself and every human being within the confines of the South, it will be impossible for you to get the strength to do the things you need to do.”

Representing 250,000 young Americans, 534 delegates were joined by a reported 2,000 observers at Fifth Street Baptist Church. Their average age was 22. Half were women, and most of them were from the South. Delegates established a four-point program for jobs, health care, education, and full citizenship for black and poor southerners.

Young people of the South saw SNYC a vehicle to chart a new way by creating partnerships across traditional barriers of race, class, gender, and educational pedigree. World-wide and ahead of their time, these young activists looked beyond the caste system of the American South to embrace a human rights agenda.

NNC and SNYC were created in a time of rising fascism overseas and a realization that New Deal programs for families devastated by the Depression were failing to reach black Americans. Black communities lacked access to education, housing, and health care, and were locked out of a political system constructed to exclude them through literacy tests and poll taxes.

Founding member Ed Strong thought blacks had been duped by the New Deal. “We were promised cars in every garage and a chicken in every pot,” he said in an early speech, “but we not only do not have two cars in every garage but we have lost both the garage and the pot.”

Blacks in the South also faced the threat of lynching, the ultimate tool of white power, a practice more widespread than we have been taught. (See more on lynchings in South Carolina on page 30.)

Conditions were so harsh that by 1930 some 1.6 million black people had moved North and West to escape poverty and violence in the South. For the first time in 120 years, South Carolina’s population became majority white in 1930. By 1960, about 2,000 black South Carolinians had moved to New York. By 1940, some 41,000 had settled there.

Philadelphia also drew blacks from South Carolina, nearly half of those fleeing between 1917 and 1923. By 1930, one in 10 Philadelphians was born in the Palmetto State. That mass migration had lasting implications for those who fled and those left behind.

As historian Johnetta Richards noted in her 1987 dissertation on SNYC, “whites controlled the ballot, the benches in the local park, and even southern history. The SNYC urged local blacks to resist this state of physical and mental dominance through a global politics that linked them to other working-class peoples around the world.”

They were living in perilous times, but the young people in SNYC felt connected to a movement larger than themselves. They took to heart the adage: Don’t mourn; organize!

Organize they did. Steep odds didn’t dampen their enthusiasm or stop their forward motion. In their first year, they established more than 20 clubs across the South.

SNYC’s first campaign was to help organize tobacco workers in Virginia. Strikes there in the spring of 1937 led to a doubling of workers’ wages and an eight-hour work day. The triumph was long overdue, as black workers for 200 years had been relegated the worst work of stemming tobacco, a tedious job often done in unventilated rooms.

SNYC sent CIO representatives James Jackson and C. Columbus Atston to Richmond, where they organized more than 5,000 tobacco workers into the union. The move boosted the income of blacks in Richmond by $250,000 annually.

The early victory affirmed SNYC’s strategy of building coalitions between white labor and black activists. They understood the strength of those alliances, and the power of presenting a united front.

While fighting for fair pay for tobacco workers, the SNYC staff in Richmond got by that first year on a combined salary of $817. What they didn’t have in money they made up for in creative energy and youthful optimism.

That first year, SNYC opened the Negro Community Theater in Richmond that staged works written and performed by black artists. (See more about SNYC using the arts as an organizing tool on page 13.) It also held the first of its youth leadership training seminars in Richmond to teach civics, history, and organizing skills to young activists.

In 1939, SNYC moved its headquarters to Birmingham, AL. A benefactor gave it a building in the area from which to operate, with space to hold meetings, literacy classes, and cultural programs. That same year, SNYC’s council in New Orleans established a labor school with courses created for workers. Its success led to more such schools opening in Tennessee and West Virginia.

“The reputation of the Youth Congress flourished as it became the unofficial barometer for youthful black thought in the Roosevelt Administration via its relations with Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune,” Richards wrote. The South Carolina native and nationally renowned educator was the only woman in FDR’s “Black Cabinet,” advising the president on matters of race. Bethune joined SNYC’s advisory board early on, lending the organization gravitas and elevating its national profile.

Simkins assumed various roles and responsibilities, working tirelessly to promote the SNYC in Columbia, Richards wrote. “Simultaneously involved in local campaigns for recreation and for hospital facilities for blacks, Simkins employed ‘personal button-holings’ to get people to join.”

In July of 1945, Simkins reported to SNYC headquarters about progress on the ground in South Carolina, “Picture me getting out not less than 10,000 cards and letters in this heat.”
Simkins was on the planning committee that convinced the board to hold SNYC’s 7th conference in Columbia. Converging forces made the Palmetto State the perfect backdrop for a serious conversation about race, democracy, and hypocrisy.

**Eyes on South Carolina**

In 1945, native son and staunch segregationist James Byrnes had assumed the international stage as secretary of state, appointed to the position upon FDR’s death. By then, he’d already served in the US House and Senate, and on the US Supreme Court. He would later be elected governor of South Carolina.

Byrnes, a protégé of “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman, had opposed fair labor and anti-lynching laws while in Congress, voting in lockstep with other Southern lawmakers under the guise of states rights. SNYC called Sec. Byrnes out, asking why someone with his record would be charged with selling democracy abroad.

South Carolina was making news for defying a 1944 US Supreme Court order declaring the white-only Texas Democratic primary unconstitutional. Instead of following the law, the Palmetto State’s political elite elected to turn parties into private clubs, a move that allowed the state’s Democratic political machine to remain effectively all-white.

Outraged but not defeated, a group that included Simkins and led by McCray formed the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP). At the party’s convention, they elected 18 delegates to attend the 1944 national Democratic convention in Chicago, adopted a 10-point platform, and nominated oscara McCaine for the US Senate. The PDP was refused any seats, the all-white delegation represented South Carolina, and McCaine’s name never made the ballot.

This happened 20 years before the better-known Fannie Lou Hamer led the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964 to challenge the all-white Mississippi delegation to the National Democratic Party Convention in Chicago. While the PDP did not win any electoral victories, it moved the state closer to full enfranchisement.

**Recovering South Carolina’s Stolen Past**

History Denied

“As this is the firing line not simply for the emancipation of the American Negro but for the emancipation of the African Negro and the Negroes of the West Indies; for the emancipation of the colored races, and for the emancipation of the white slaves of modern capitalist monopoly.”

Remember here, too, that you do not stand alone. It may come to pass that you do not remember here, because the monopoly.

**FDR’s Secretary of State**

Eugene “Bull” Connor heard that SNYC would be holding an integrated conference in Birmingham, he set about issuing grave warnings. This is the same Connor who would rise to national prominence during the 1960s, becoming the poster boy for white power. It was at his directive that fire hoses and attack dogs were trained on civil rights marchers. In five days in May 1963, he arrested 3,000 protesters, 600 of them minors, some as young as 8 years old.

Connor had started his professional life as a baseball announcer on the radio, which gave him a leg up with the public when he decided to run for a seat in the Alabama House in 1934. He won, and went on to serve four terms as Birmingham’s head of public safety, beginning in 1937. He was not about...
Three days before the conference, Connor called Burnham to his office and grilled him for two hours, throwing his weight around in an effort to silence SNYC. Connor threatened, “There’s no Klan here, but there will be if you persist with this meeting.” He added, “You’re the Executive Secretary of the organization. That ain’t no job. I ought to lock you up for vagrancy.”

Connor used similar tactics to intimidate the pastor at the church where the event was to be held, warning that if the meeting took place God would “strike the church down.” He promised cops would be stationed at the church doors to ensure no whites entered, as it didn’t have separate bathrooms for blacks and whites.

Rattled by Connor’s threats, the pastor withdrew his offer to serve as event host. A second church stepped up, but Connor threatened to reschedule the invitation. The pattern repeated with yet a third church. SNYC finally found refuge at Rev. C. Herbert Oliver’s small church, the Alliance Gospel Tabernacle.

Tension was thick on the opening night of the conference. The first speaker was Philadelphia Judge Joseph Rainey, whose grandfather was a South Carolina native and the first black Reconstruction Congressman. He likened the current racial hostility to a noose, and called the rise in red hating as “the cheapest answer to embarrassing questions.”

Among the assembled was Columbia’s Modjeska Simkins, then serving as Secretary of the NAACP’s State Conference of Branches and a senior advisor to SNYC. She was there when police arrived. They took photographs of the scene and then arrested three white attendees on charges of violating segregation laws. Rev. Oliver also was arrested. They were released on $300 bail.

Meanwhile, the SNYC office got a call from the Ku Klux Klan threatening violence. A crowd of 30 whites and 100 blacks had gathered at the church to hear the evening’s scheduled speaker, Idaho Sen. Glen Taylor, Henry Wallace’s vice-presidential running mate on the Progressive Party’s ticket.

Wallace, President Roosevelt’s vice-president and founder of the Progressive Party, was pitted against Strom Thurmond, who was running for president as a Dixicrat.

Hearing of the arrangement to accommodate the city by segregating the audience, Taylor called SNYC organizers to say he would not speak if that were the case. It was Simkins who challenged the city to a noose, and called the rise in red hating as “the cheapest answer to embarrassing questions.”

Accounts vary as to exactly what happened during the fracas. Either Taylor fell or took a swing at the officer, who sent Taylor sprawling to the ground and then shoved him against a fence with enough force to leave scratches. Taylor was charged with disorderly conduct and fined $100.

The conference carried on in spite of the arrests, deviating from the schedule only to allow delegates to attend the funeral of a 19-year-old black boy killed by Birmingham police, the fifth such case in a month.

Taylor’s arrest made national news. Wallace defended his running mate, calling his challenge of segregation laws justified. “Glen was not violating any law,” he said. “He was upholding the basic law of the land, the Constitution of the United States.”

Three days later, Taylor appeared in court, where he was quickly convicted, fined $50, and given a suspended sentence of 180 days in jail. Taylor was put on probation for six months, presumably lasting through the end of his campaign. The judge called the matter a "publicity stunt." The judge called the matter a “publicity stunt.”

Editors at the Columbia Record called The State carried a front-page story reporting that the judge had given Taylor “a profound tongue lashing, introducing the racial issue into the case” and that the judge called it a “publicity stunt.”

During the hearing, the attorney general, State Department and defense attorneys were called to create disturbances between the white and Negro races in the South.”

In Columbia, the Sunday May 5 edition of The State carried a front-page story reporting that the judge had given Taylor “a profound tongue lashing, introducing the racial issue into the case.”

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Southern courts were deeply embedded in the exploitation of black workers in the South long after the formal abolition of slavery. States exploited the Thirteenth Amendment's exemption for prisoners by passing “Black Codes” and convict leasing laws that branded black people as criminals to facilitate their reenslavement for state profit.

Further, although the Civil Rights Act of 1875 and Supreme Court rulings banned racial discrimination in jury selection, local officials barred African Americans from serving on juries. African Americans virtually disappeared from the Southern jury box by 1900, even in counties where they constituted an overwhelming majority of the local population, which reinforced the impunity under which lynching flourished.

The fairness of the judicial system was wholly compromised for African Americans, and the courts operated as tools of their subjugation.

Equal Justice Initiative

Recovering South Carolina’s Stolen Past

The Blinding of Sgt. Isaac Woodard

In February 1946, South Carolina made international news after the brutal beating of black WWII veteran Isaac Woodard in Batesburg. The 27-year-old, who had trained at Fort Jackson and was deployed 15 months in the South Pacific, was traveling to Winnsboro by bus to reunite with his wife when he was viciously attacked and bludgeoned by police during a bus stop, then thrown in jail without medical treatment.

Woodard wrote in his affidavit, “When they discharged me from Camp Gordon, I’d given four years of my life to my country. I had survived the war and come home to the land of the free. I became a casualty five hours later.”

Woodard’s ordeal began in Aiken, where the bus had stopped.

When he asked to be let off so he could use the rest room, the driver refused, falsely accusing him of being drunk. He was finally allowed to off the bus, but the next stop was hauled off by police.

When Woodard objected, the cops bludgeoned him with a blackjack, gouging out his eyes, and locked him up until morning. In court, he pleaded guilty to being drunk and disorderly. He was fined $50, but was $6 short. The court demanded he cash his Army discharge payment to cover the cost, but gave up when they realized he couldn’t see to sign the check.

Woodard was sent to the Veteran’s Hospital in Columbia, where he spent three months being treated for his injuries. Upon his release, he moved to New York to stay with his sisters, leaving behind his wife and marriage.

John McCray was the first to write about the case in The Lighthouse Informer. It soon caught the attention of Orson Welles, who devoted five of his national radio broadcasts to the injustice. “The blind soldier fought for me in this war,” Welles said. “The least I can do is fight for him. I have eyes. He hasn’t. I have a voice on the radio. He hasn’t. I was born a white man, and until a colored man is a full citizen, like me, I haven’t the leisure to enjoy the freedom that a colored man risked his life to maintain for me. Until somebody beats me and blinds me, I am in his debt.”

In June, SNYC organizer Louis Burnham penned a letter to Simkins asking her thoughts about sending a letter to South Carolina Gov. Williams calling upon him to “intervene for the punishment of the sadists” who brutalized Sgt. Woodard. “It seems to me that all decent Americans must react to this case vigorously, and especially the SNYC in South Carolina.” SNYC had a particular interest in the case, he said, given the upcoming conference in Columbia.

In August, a dazzling line-up of stars—including Cab Calloway, Milton Berle, and Billie Holiday—drew a crowd of 31,000 to a fundraiser for Woodard in New York City. To close the show, Woody Guthrie sang “The Blinding of Isaac Woodard.”

Boxing legend Joe Louis made a rare public appearance at the fundraiser. “Nobody in America should have to go through second class citizenship,” he told the crowd. “Me and a whole lot of black guys went out fighting for the American cause. Now we’re going to have to get America to give us our civil rights, too. We earned them.”

President Harry Truman was angered by the state’s failure to bring charges against Woodard’s assailants, and ordered federal authorities to intervene.

In October, Batesburg Police Chief Lynwood Shull was indicted in US District Court in Columbia. Shull was found not guilty by an all-white jury.

The presiding judge in the Shull trial, J. Waters Waring, decided the federal prosecutor for failing to make his case, later writing, “I was shocked by the hypocrisy of my government.”

The case angered and galvanized War- ing, who would rule a year later that the state’s Democratic Party could no longer exclude black citizens from voting in the primary. In 1951, he called school segregation unconstitutional in his dissent in the Briggs v. Elliott case, which would join four other cases to go before the US Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education in 1954.

It was Waring’s assertion that “seg- regation is per se inequality” which formed the legal basis for the court’s unanimous decision.
Teach Your Children Well

The history textbooks that schooled generations of South Carolina children were sanitized and whitewashed. Some argue they still are.

Of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery, students learned, “Very strict regulations… were provided for the freed slaves. Most of the Negroes were ignorant and some of them were almost savages. All were unaccustomed to taking care of themselves. The sudden freeing of the slaves meant a tremendous problem for the whites.”

“The horrors of war were nothing compared to this period when Congress was ‘reconstructing’ the State. It was the darkest and bitterest time we have ever known. The Carpet Baggers, Scalawags and the Negroes were called Radicals. Backed by US troops, they took complete charge of affairs.”

The Simms History of South Carolina, written by Mary Simms Oliphant, was a revision of a book by her grandfather, William Gilmore Simms, a slave owner at Woodlands Plantation near Bamberg. He was a well-known novelist who published the original textbook in 1840.

Reconstruction à la Oliphant

In the Simms textbook, Reconstruction is painted as a catastrophic event, rife with scoundrels and outsiders meddling in state affairs, and freed slaves run amok. Here is an example of what children were reading in South Carolina’s classrooms:

“The Congress of the US kept troops in South Carolina to keep those thieves in power. Negro militia companies were organized and white companies were ordered to disband.”

“The arming of the Negroes, crime increased greatly. Houses were burned, women were insulted on the streets, white men were arrested on slender excuses, murders and burglaries were frequent.”

Faced with these terrible conditions, South Carolinians banded together and formed the Ku Klux Klan. Whenever the Negroes gave trouble, the Ku Klux Klan was necessary for the survival of white South Carolinians. We know that they claim that slaves were lucky to be captive in the United States. We know that they claim that slaves were adoring and loyal and yet dangerous.

“We know that they claim that the abolitionists and any other ‘outsiders’ attempting to end slavery were malevolent. We know that they claim that Radical Reconstruction was evil. We know that they claim that the Ku Klux Klan was necessary for the survival of white South Carolinians. We know that the earlier texts claimed that Negro History (Negro participation in Civil War and Reconstruction), Examine text books.

The Simms book so offended Modjeska Monteith Simkins that she refused to use it in 1928 when she was teaching at Booker T. Washington High School in Columbia, choosing instead to teach algebra rather than a history she knew to be false.

The Journal of Thought, a peer-reviewed publication by and for educators, published USC graduate student Alan Weider’s 1995 study on the state’s history textbooks. It concluded with this bleak summation: “So what do we know? One thing that we know through reviewing the South Carolina school history textbooks is that they are racist. We know that they claim that slaves were lucky to be captive in the United States. We know that they claim that slaves were adoring and loyal and yet dangerous.

[“Negroes] were so accustomed to being taken care of that they had no idea how to behave under freedom. They stole cattle, chickens, and hogs, and burned barns and stables. They were not willing to work. They were like children playing hooky the moment the teacher’s back was turned.

“There were so many more Negroes than whites that they would have been in control if they had been allowed to vote. They had nearly ruined the State during the years they voted.

“The whites were determined that this should not happen again. Regulations were made which prevented the Negroes from voting, and to this day South Carolina has a white man’s government.

“The welfare of two races living in one small state is a problem you will have to face when you become citizens.”

Mary Simms Oliphant

The New Simms History of South Carolina, 1940

History Denied

Recovering South Carolina’s Stolen Past
the Constitution of 1895 and its Black Codes were important for the survival of white South Carolina. We know that the later texts ignored twentieth century black history in South Carolina. And finally, we know that none of the texts infused the history of South Carolina’s African-Americans into their histories of the state.”

More recently, Donald Yacovone studied Harvard University’s collection of some 3,000 history texts from 1800 through the 1980s. He found, “The assumptions of white priority, white domination, and white importance underlie every chapter and every theme of the thousands of textbooks that blanketed the country. This is the vast tectonic plate that underlies American culture.”

In the April 8, 2018, issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, Yacovone said, “While the worst features of our textbook legacy may have ended, the themes, facts, and attitudes of supremacist ideologies are deeply embedded in what we teach and how we teach it. History took place in European exploration, colonization, revolution, Constitution-forming, party politics, and presidential administrations—and nowhere else.”

Historian I. A. Newby underscored the damage that textbooks have inflicted on generations of students in Black Carolians: A History of Blacks in South Carolina from 1895 to 1968. “It inculcated in white Carolinians a set of historical ‘truths’ that were always an obstacle to racial reform, while it poisoned, or sought to poison, the minds of blacks with assertions of their own inferiority and worthlessness.”

Newby noted that most of the textbooks do not mention a single black by name. “When blacks are discussed it is only in a disparaging context. Carolinians are white people. The student, white or black, who absorbed and accepted the information in these books had no understanding of his state or its people. He had instead a set of biases which interfered with a clear comprehension of past and present.”

South Carolina has a chance to offer a more honest and inclusive curriculum. The state’s education standards for teaching history, social studies, and civics are under review, and changes set to go into effect in 2020. The state standards were last revised in 2011. A draft of those guidelines released in 2017 made national news when historians pointed out that there was no mention of Nazism or the Holocaust. Also missing were mention of Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Smalls, who freed himself by commandeering a Confederate ship in 1862 and went on to be elected a state lawmaker and congressman. Ironically, Smalls also helped establish the South Carolina’s public school system—the very entity that proposed history requirements did “not offer a complete narrative of slavery and African Americans, perpetuates a negative image of African Americans, excludes themes of African American heroism, and maintains myths related to slavery.”

Eargle concluded that South Carolina’s standards “offers teachers and students a narrow image of African Americans. does not debunk myths such as paternalistic slave-owners, excludes racism and slavery as a cause of the Civil War, and overlooks the importance of slave culture and resistance.”

Beginning in the mid-1980s, an “accountability movement” took root in the American school system. Within a decade, it had manifested in the form of pro-scribed curricula and test-based teaching and tracking of scores. In 2002, the federal No Child Left Behind Act mandated a systematic assessment of public school students’ mastery of the standards.

Eargle’s research revealed “powerful conservative groups sought standardization policies and curriculum to reduce education to meeting conservative ideological and economic goals, the removal of discourse and diversity from pedagogy, and the ending of teachers as engaged academics in a democracy.”

Composite portrait of the “radical” members of the South Carolina legislature, created ca. 1868–72.
Lynchings in South Carolina

Between 1877 and 1950, thousands of men, women, and children in the South were killed by white mobs. They have been the faceless, nameless victims of a racist culture. Until now.

Harry Truman, asking him to issue a public statement condemning the practice of lynching, and recommending a package of measures to help stem mob violence.

Truman declined. Not surprised, Robeson was nonetheless disappointed, pointing out the irony that his government was engaging in the Nuremberg trials in Germany while ignoring atrocities in America.

The Legacy of Racial Terror

In the spring of 2018, a museum opened in Montgomery, AL, that sheds rare light on Lynchings in America, a practice the country has until recently minimized in its scope and significance. The six-acre site is “a sacred space for truth-telling and reflection about racial terror in America and its legacy.” It’s an essential reckoning if we are ever to understand the damage left in slavery’s wake.

“I hope people will feel like they’ve been deceived a little by the history they’ve been taught, and that they need to recover from that,” said Bryan Stevenson, who led the team that spent thousands of hours uncovering the names and stories of lynching victims. “Truth and reconciliation work is always hard. It’s challenging, but if we have the courage to tell the truth and hear the truth, things happen.”

Stevenson and his colleagues at the nonprofit Equal Justice Initiative in Alabama recently released Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror. The report documents 4,084 Lynchings of black men, women, and children in 12 southern states between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 through 1950. Another 300 were documented in other states.

The report noted in all of the subject states “we observed that there is an astonishing absence of any effort to acknowledge, discuss, or address lynching. Many of the communities where Lynchings took place have gone to great lengths to erect markers and monuments that memorialize the Civil War, the Confederacy, and historical events during which local power was violently reclaimed by white Southerners.

“These communities celebrate and honor the architects of racial subordination and political leaders known for their belief in white supremacy. There are very few monuments or memorials that address the history and legacy of lynching in particular or the struggle for racial equality more generally.”

White also were lynched during that period, most suspected of committing a capital crime. Tuskegee University professor, at 4,147 black and 1,293 white extrajudicial killings between 1882 and 1951.

For its study, EJI focused on what it terms “racial terror lynchings” because of their nature and intent. The Lynchings of African Americans, often public spectacles, were intended to terrorize entire communities of color. Sometimes the family would be prevented from collecting the body, leaving it to hang as a grizzly warning.

“We cannot heal the deep wounds inflicted during the era of racial terror until we tell the truth about it,” Stevenson said in the report. “The geographic, political, economic, and social consequences of decades of terror Lynchings can still be seen in many communities today and the damage that needs to be confronted and discussed. Only then can we meaningfully address the contemporary problems that are lynching’s legacy.”

Thanks to EJI, we now have names and dates to identify and remember the victims. At least 185 of those names are from South Carolina.

In February 1898, a white mob in Lake City, shot up and burned the home of a black family. Frazer Baker and his infant daughter were killed, the child in the arms of her mother. Baker left three wounded children and a widowed wife, Lavinia, who was also shot.

Baker had been appointed postmaster by President William McKinley. That didn’t sit well with the white majority in Lake City. They tried to have him removed, and when that didn’t work, shot him down, beginning with burning the post office to the ground and, later, the crucifixes of murders. SC Sen. Ben Tillman defended the lynching by the “prideful people” of Lake City who refused to “get their mail from a nigger.”

Renowned black journalist Ida B. Wells helped elevate the case in the national press, and spurred a campaign
“The Ku Klux…would take the negroes’ own guns, and tie the guns around their necks in the following manner: The barrel of one gun was tied with wire around the negro’s neck, and the stock of the other gun was fastened with wire around the negro’s neck. The wooden parts of the guns would rot, and sometimes the bodies would wash down on the rocks at …Jeter’s River. In 1916, Anthony Crawford was lynched in Abbeville by a crowd of men and boys of color. According to an account of the assault. “Cursing a white person. On Death Row, more than twice as many black South Carolina prisoners are black as white people commit crimes at an equal rate, two of every three South Carolina prisoners are black. According to the SC Progressive Network’s Racial Justice Project, black South Carolinians are much more likely than whites to be found guilty, and consistently receive longer sentences. While black and white people commit crimes at an equal rate, two of every three South Carolina prisoners are black.

“Strange Fruit,” Billie Holiday’s haunting song about lynching, was recorded in 1939. Jazz writer Leonard Feather called it “the first significant protest in words and music, the first significant cry against racism.”

Holiday said she always thought of her father when she sang it. He died at 39 after being turned away at a white-only hospital in Texas. She wrote in her autobiography, “It reminds me of how Pop died. But I have to keep singing it, not only because people ask for it, but because 20 years after Pop died, the things that killed him are still happening in the South.”

Strange Fruit

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The balmy eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh
Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop

The Ku Klux wore white clothes and white caps. They made out like they was ghosts from the cemetery, and they would get a man and carry him off, and we never would see him again.”

Nellie Lloyd, Newberry, SC

“The 1947 murder of 24-year-old Willie Earle at the hands of a white mob in Pickens County is the last recorded lynching in South Carolina. To order a federal investigation. At a protest rally in Chicago she mocked southern lynchers “whose proud boast is their chivalry toward womanhood.” The president relented to public pressure, leading to the federal prosecution of 11 white men. The case ended in a mistrial when the all-white jury deadlocked. Three months later, on May 2, a mass meeting was held at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston to respond to the family’s needs. They passed a resolution condemning the attack, and took up money for the Baker family. In 1916, Anthony Crawford was lynched in Abbeville by a crowd of more than 200, according to his great-granddaughter Doria Johnson.

“His crime you might ask?” she wrote in an account of the assault. “Cursing a white person. On Death Row, more than twice as many black South Carolina prisoners are black as white people commit crimes at an equal rate, two of every three South Carolina prisoners are black. According to the SC Progressive Network’s Racial Justice Project, black South Carolinians are much more likely than whites to be found guilty, and consistently receive longer sentences. While black and white people commit crimes at an equal rate, two of every three South Carolina prisoners are black.

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Then the sudden smell of burning flesh
Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop

EJI makes the case that slavery is not just a thing of the past, a product of an earlier era of our state’s history best forgotten,” Vann wrote. “That would be both wrong and short-sighted. Lynching was replaced with a legal system of capital punishment that continues to mete out the death penalty disproportionately to black defendants accused of crimes involving white victims.

“It became, for all practical purposes, lynching’s stepchild.”
The hanging of Darlington’s Amy Spain

Newly freed Amy Spain was lynched March 10, 1865.

This account ran in Harper’s Weekly Sept. 30, 1865.

One of the martyrs of the cause which gave freedom to her race was that of a colored woman named Amy Spain, who was a resident of the town of Darlington, situated in a rich cotton-growing district of South Carolina.

At the time a portion of the Union army occupied the town of Darlington she expressed her satisfaction by clasping her hands and exclaiming, “Bless the Lord the Yankees have come!” She could not restrain her emotions. The long night of darkness which had bound her in slavery was about to break away.

It was impossible to repress the exuberance of her feelings; and although powerless to aid the advancing deliverers of her caste, or to injure her oppressors, the simple expression of satisfaction at the event sealed her doom.

Amy Spain died in the cause of freedom. A section of Sherman’s cavalry occupied the town, and without doing any damage passed through. Not an insult nor an unkind word was said to any of the women of that town. The men had, with guilty consciences, fled; but on their return, with their traditional chivalry, they seized upon poor Amy, and ignominiously hung her to a sycamore-tree standing in front of the court-house, under-neath which stood the block from which was monthly exhibited the slave chattels that were struck down by the overseer’s hammer to the highest bidder.

Amy Spain heroically heard her sentence, and from her prison bars declared she was prepared to die. She defied her persecutors; and as she ascended the scaffold declared she was going to a place where she would receive a crown of glory.

She was rudely interrupted by an oath from one of her executioners. To the eternal disgrace of Darlington her execution was acquiesced in and witnessed by most of the citizens of the town.

Amy Spain was launched into eternity, and the “chivalric Southern gentlemen” of Darlington had fully established their bravery by making war upon a defenseless African woman.

She sleeps quietly, with others of her race, near the beautiful village. No memorial marks her grave, but after-ages will remember this martyr of liberty. Her persecutors will pass away and be forgotten, but Amy Spain’s name is now hallowed among the Afric”ans, who, emancipated and free, date, with the stary folds of the flag of the free floating over them, speak her name with holy reverence.

Columbia activist Modjeska Monteith Simkins played leading role in SNYC

Excerpts from a 1974 interview with NC historian Jacquelyn Hall.

M
djeska Monteith Simkins: You can remember the first meeting of the Southern Negro Youth Congress. I went to Knoxville where there were miners, people in brogan shoes, people in overalls.

The average person didn’t think of wearing them then. I wasn’t even thinking they were going to the field or the mines. And those fellowes came out there with . . . overalls, and sun hats, and all of them were working and planning together.

I don’t think the South would be the same without what they did, because they opened the eyes of a number of people. The thing that the political power structure had against organizations of that kind was the fear that they would bring the black and white mass together.

Well, the first thing they did when they got a chance was to red-smeared and disrupt the movement. Now, I think if the Southern Negro Youth Congress, for instance, could have gone on, there would have been a very great change in the South because the younger people would have worked together better.

But the power structure doesn’t want that. They don’t want poor whites and Negroes getting along together. There’s always been the effort, either obvious or subtle, on the part of the reigning element to keep the forces of blacks and whites apart.

They didn’t care any more about a poor white than they did about a Negro. And they still don’t. They just give them a little more deference because he’s white like they are, but they don’t give a damn about a poor white. They’ll exploit him just like they will a Negro. I’ve seen it. I know what I’m talking about.

There were some very highly intelligent young men who organized the Southern Negro Youth Congress, some of the most brilliant [people] I’ve ever known. Louis Burnham, James Jackson, Esther [Coooper] Jackson, a brilliant young woman.

James went into hiding for a number of years. They intended to persecute him like they did some other people who they said had communist leanings. Paul Robeson was closely con-

ected with the Southern Negro Youth Congress. W.E.B. DuBois was an adherent. I have some programs from the meetings.

Jacquelyn Hall: Were there white students in the organization?

MMS: Yes, there were some. There were a number of them in 1946, and there were some of them at Birmingham. Some of them were arrested and persecuted by Bull Connor and his crowd. I was down in Birmingham at the time [The 8th annual SNYC conference was held in Alabama April 23–25, 1948].

JH: The Congress was accused of being a Communist front organization, of course.

MMS: Yes.

JH: What would you say that the role of the Communist Party in the Southern movement was?

MMS: I always heard a lot about communists trying to influence Negroes and organizing them into certain movements and all like that, but I never saw any effect of it. I never saw this thing they were talking about, that communists were always trying to influence and build a whole phalanx of activists among blacks. I never saw it, and I’ve got about as sharp an eye as anybody. Now, I belonged to all kind of things that were called communist fronts, so that I’ve been red-smeared up and down South Carolina.

JH: Were you ever called before HUAC [House UnAmerican Activities Committee]?

MMS: Never. I wanted to be, but they never called me. I though once, during the Henry Wallace campaign, that I might be, but I wasn’t.
Seeing “Red Under Every Bed”

Brett Bursey

“I’m no Communist, and never have been. If Communists do all the good things you all say they do, it looks like to me that it would be good to be one.”

Modjeska Monteith Simkins

Simkins was a teenager when WWI broke out, and 17 when the Russian revolution inspired workers of the world to rise up. She was familiar with the phenomenon of people who do good things being blamed for bad things by people who profit from them. Simkins herself was, as she put it, “red-smeared up and down South Carolina” for doing good things.

The first Red Scare came during the patriotic fervor of war and was fuelled by anti-immigrant hysteria, an increasingly militant labor movement, and fear that anarchists, socialists, and communists were conspiring to start a workers’ revolution in the United States.

The Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917 prohibited interference with US war efforts, and prohibited speaking or publishing anything deemed as disrespectful to the US government. Labor activists were deemed as disrespectful to the US government. Labor activists were arrested and deported, including prominent leftist Congressman Victor Berger and Industrial Workers of the World founder Eugene Debs. On Sept. 5, 1917, IWW offices in more than 20 cities were raided. Their common crimes were opposition to the war and to capitalism.

Workers struggling under brutal conditions were unionizing, striking, and placing blame for their poor conditions on factory owners. Opposition to the war was led by many of the same socialists and Christian activists advocating for workers’ rights, many of whom were European immigrants deemed un-American agitators.

The Palmer Raids of 1919 and 1920, orchestrated by US Attorney General Mitchell Palmer, targeted labor activists, leftists, and immigrants President Woodrow Wilson called “hyphenated Americans” who “poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life...and must be crushed. Any man who carries a hymen about with him carries a dagger that he is ready to plunge into the vitals of this Republic.”

Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels criticized Palmer “for seeing red behind every bush and every demand for an increase in wages.” More than 10,000 labor activists were arrested in federal raids in 23 states. Some 3,500 were jailed, and more than 500 were deported. None of the arrests were in the South, but surely participants at the Sunday meetings of the Richland County Socialist Party (advertised in The State newspaper) felt the heat of the red fever.

Commies in Dixie

Anti-communism came to South Carolina when union organizers started gaining traction in textile mills in the early 1930s. In 1934, seven striking textile workers were shot and killed in Honea Path. (See more on page 38.) The killings broke the strike as well as workers’ appetite for unionism. To this day, organized labor is widely denounced in South Carolina, accused of being orchestrated by ill-intentioned outsiders.

After WWII, resistance to white supremacy paralleled the rapid rise of anti-communism. US relations with the Soviet Union were deteriorating, while communism was blamed for labor and racial unrest—especially in the South.

At the 1946 Southern Negro Youth Conference in Columbia, Paul Robeson warned, “Behind this red bogey [of communism] that Hitler used, there is the hope of scaring away every liberal from fighting for the rights of oppressed peoples.”

James Byrnes had represented South Carolina in the US House and Senate before being appointed to the US Supreme Court by President Franklin Roosevelt. After a year on the court, Byrnes became the just one to carry the argument, the US tried to keep nuclear weapons plans secret, and the world entered a race for mutually assured destruction.

By 1947, a second Red Scare was in full swing. President Harry Truman signed an executive order requiring federal employees to take the oath that they were not communists. Congressional conservatives overrode Truman’s veto of the Taft-Hartley Act which, among other things, required union officers to swear that they were not communists.

The Act allowed states to pass “right to work laws” that decimated union officers to swear that they were not communists. The Act allowed states to pass “right to work laws” that decimated union membership. Classical right to work laws allow workers to take work laws” that decimated union membership. Classical right to work laws allow workers to take advantage of union wages and protections on jobs without having to pay union dues.

In 1950, the Subversive Activities Control Act passed. It established the Subversive Activities Control Board and required communist organizations to register. Once on the list, citizens could be prevented from entering or leaving the country. It also allowed “emergency detention” of those who “probably engage in, or conspire with others, in acts of espionage of sabotage.” The act made picking a federal courthouse a felony.

In 1950, US Sen. Joseph McCarthy seized national headlines after claiming he had a list of members of a Communist Party spy ring inside the State Department. McCarthy alleged there were Soviet spies and sympathizers infiltrating the government, universities, and the film industry.

In 1951, the Subversive Activities Registration Act passed in South Carolina requiring “every member of a subversive organization, or an organization subject to foreign control, every foreign agent and every person who advocates, teaches, advises or practices the duty, necessity or propriety of controlling, conducting, seizing or overthrowing the government of the United States, (or) of this State…shall register with the Secretary of State.” Subversives failing to register faced a $25,000 fine and 10 years in prison.

In 1953, McCarthy called a string of high-profile actors and entertainers before a congressional committee, accusing them of being communists. Similarly, in the “Lavender Scare” McCarthy focused on exposing suspected homosexuals as security risks because of potential blackmail.

By late 1954, McCarthy had become the target of ridicule for his persistent grandstanding, and was censured by the Senate. The term “McCarthyism” has taken on a broader meaning, now used more generally to describe reckless, unsubstantiated accusations, as well as attacks on the character or patriotism of political adversaries.

In 1954, the Communist Control Act outlawed the Communist Party USA. Membership or support for the Party was punishable by a $25,000 fine and 10 years in prison.

Brett Bursey is director of the SC Progressive Network. After being queried by the Secretary of State’s office in 1994, he became the state’s first and only registered subversive before the law was debated and removed in 2010.  

President Harry Truman, Secretary of State James Byrnes, and Fleet Admiral William Leahy in Berlin, July 16, 1945.
The General Textile Strike, initiated and led by southern workers and extending from Alabama to Maine, was a long time coming. Since the late 1920s, workers were suffering reduced wages and heavier workloads. The average mill worker in South Carolina in 1932 made less than $10 a week.

The United Textile Workers union went on strike at their Southern Carolina headquarters in Greenville on Sept. 1. With strikers from Spartanburg mobilized to shut down the area’s mills. They were among hundreds of thousands of mill workers who walked off the job on Labor Day, launching one of the largest strikes in American history.

Bloody Thursday

Textile workers in South Carolina were in the eye of a national storm in the fall of 1934. They were among hundreds of thousands of mill workers who walked off the job on Labor Day, launching one of the largest strikes in American history.

Tensions were high on the morning of Sept. 5 at Greenville’s Dunne Mill when a deputy sheriff shot a worker in the back after he reportedly brandished a knife, wounding but not killing him.

The next day, 35 miles south in Honea Path, seven workers were killed and some 20 wounded at Chiquola Mill. The Anderson Independent newspapers reported that non-union workers and deputized citizens shot first.

The New York Times reported, “Without warning came the first shots, followed by many others, and for a few minutes there was bedlam. Striker after striker fell to the ground, with the cries of wounded men sounding over the field and men and women running shrieking from the scene.”

A horrified community turned out in the thousands to bury the dead. While the strike collapsed soon after, it was not a futile campaign. Within a year, Congress passed the National Labor Relations Standards Act. Three years later, the Fair Labor Standards Act banned child labor, set maximum hours, and established a minimum wage.

Instead of claiming its role in a painful but critical historical event, the community soon suffered a widespread case of amnesia. “Not only have Honea Path’s founding fathers done little to preserve the town’s rich legacy, but it seems that some genuinely want to forget,” wrote Frank Beacham, whose grandfather—the town’s mayor and mill superintendent—organized the men who fired at striking workers on what would become known as Bloody Thursday.

In his book Whittawash: A Southern Journey through Music, Mayhem and Murder, Beacham recounts, “When I was growing up in Honea Path during the 1960s, the subject of the mill violence was taboo. There were hints of what happened, of course, but the topic was never discussed in the open. I learned the truth about Honea Path’s history in 1994 from a documentary film called ‘The Uprising of ’34.’

“Since that film essentially ended Honea Path’s six-decade long secret, I’ve learned about the history of the town and its people through many conversations and stories. I was shocked to find one of the most compelling stories I’ve ever heard connected to my own family and hometown. Even more shocking, I found, was how an event of such magnitude and importance to the lives of generations of Honea Path families could have been hidden and buried for so long.

“There was a campaign of fear and intimidation after the shootings that effectively erased public discussion of what had happened. Fearful workers who wanted to keep their jobs put a self-imposed lid on their own past. Somehow, as the years went by, the violence at Chiquola evolved into a source of shame. Many myths have built up over the years about the workers who died in Honea Path 75 years ago. They were called an isolated group of troublemakers and rabble-rousers. Some, mainly the mill’s former management, claimed they deserved what happened to them.

“I see it another way. I think these mill workers risked everything—their jobs, their freedom and ultimately their lives—for a cause they believed in. They made a decision to exert some control over their changing place in an increasingly industrialized world. Their method was to attempt to organize their fellow workers into a labor union.”

In 1995, SC ETV declined to air “The Uprising of ’34,” which was broadcast nationally. The documentary also was banned at Spartanburg Tech for fear of “sending the wrong message.” The film documents not just the strike and its violent end, but also the subsequent effort to cleanse it from the public record. That irony wasn’t lost on South Carolina viewers still talking about SC ETV’s decision nearly three years later.

“For years, public television stations across the country have been expanding our grasp of the past by making the South a vivid and compelling place. But the story of Bloody Thursday has been left out of the public record. Now, the film and its story must be told.”

In 1995, SC ETV declined to air “The Uprising of ’34,” which was broadcast nationally. The documentary also was banned at Spartanburg Tech for fear of “sending the wrong message.” The film documents not just the strike and its violent end, but also the subsequent effort to cleanse it from the public record. That irony wasn’t lost on South Carolina viewers still talking about SC ETV’s decision nearly three years later.

“Fifteen-year-old Mack Duncan smelled trouble the minute he turned up for the 6am shift at the Chiquola Mill. The strike had deeply divided the mill community, and one shift had already stopped rung.

“As he approached the mill, he saw a huge crowd massed at the gate, mainly strike supporters, and he was able to get inside, only with the aid of a policeman.

“He did not see what happened, but all of a sudden you heard shooting. For about five minutes it was just ding, bang—and it was bad.”

“When the shooting stopped, six strikers lay dead, another critically wounded (he died later), and upward of a score had been hit. The killings at Honea Path was the strike’s bloodiest single incident.”

John Salmond, The General Textile Strike of 1934: From Maine to Alabama
“My father’s brother Ira Davis was killed in the [Chiquola Mill] strike, and his family said he was trying to go to work. My father said someone in the community came to the family and told them what had happened.

“Daddy said they stayed up and dug Ira’s grave that night. Ira left three children, and his wife lost her family and told them what had happened.

“I remember my parents talking about being blackballed if you were not careful with what you said.

“Unfortunately, Daddy died when I was in my 20s, and I did not ask him more about the strike, but I could tell Daddy was hurt by the massacre. He did say the management of the mill were given guns and stood on top of the mill.

“It is a dark mark on society that these people were allowed to walk away free and were not punished for killing these people.”

E. Bell
Honea Path resident

Chiquola Mill worker Lois McClain after she was shot. The bullet in her hand was never removed, and was buried with her when she died at age 91.

E. Bell

Recovering South Carolina’s Stolen Past

“Women work today. Yes. But are they paid accordingly? No. Women today are getting wise. Those who can are joining various trade unions.

Negro women played an important part in winning the war... were behind the noise—the hammer, the thunder, the drive. Negro women have pooled their strength with other Americans to achieve a common goal: victory.

They carried their full share of the nation’s wartime load. In the steel mills, in the foundries, the aircraft plants and in the shipyards, Negro women helped to make the weapons of war.

Negro women’s wartime performances proved that by giving them the training, they can succeed in work that any other women can do. Since the war, many of these women were laid off.”

Florence Valentine, Columbia, 1946

airing countless documentaries that trace our rich and complex history,” Reginald Stuart wrote in the journal Southern Change. “In South Carolina, operators of the state’s public television system have unintentionally succeeded in developing a new way to stir public interest in our history—don’t air a documentary. Case in point: ‘Uprising of ’34,’ a well-crafted oral history about the campaign to organize Southern textile workers, a movement spurred by the promises of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal.

“Release of the documentary in 1995 marked the first time since the 1930s that much of the history of the strike was explored in detail for the general public. Most history books in the region say little if anything about the strike and the people who participated in it say even less.”

It wasn’t the first time SC ETV played it safe by passing on programs that might ruffle the feathers of state lawmakers, who oversee the agency’s budget and appoint its board of directors. South Carolina is the only state where all its educational broadcast licenses (63) are owned by the state. South Carolina is the only state where its lawmakers, who oversee the agency’s budget and appoint its board of directors, can ruffle the feathers of the legislature.

In 1980, the station declined to air a program recounting the execution of a young woman in a Saudi royal family who was found guilty of adultery. John West was then serving as US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, and SC ETV worried that airing the program might embarrass the former South Carolina governor.

In 1991, SC ETV chose to blur out the last scene in “The Grapes of Wrath,” in which a white woman takes a starving black man to her breast. Programs with gay content routinely have been censored.

Women from mothers’ clubs and housewives’ leagues exchanged experiences in fighting against the high cost of living. Negro women welcomed the white women delegates who came to the Congress as an evidence of the growing sense of unity between them.

Organization and unity were the keynote of the resolution on women passed by the Congress. All three to be joined together to work for adequate social legislation, for better relief, and against war and fascism.

The delegates have returned to their homes, but not as they came. These women now have a program around which they will rally their sisters at work and in the home.

They have a year in which to carry through the declarations of their resolution, so that by May, 1937, when the National Negro Congress again convenes... they will come together once more in greater numbers and with a different story to tell, of accomplishment, of a struggle nearer the goal of the liberation of Negro women from bitter exploitation and oppression.

Louise Thompson Patterson, in CP USA journal Woman Today, April 1936. Edited for space.

F aurly dawn on the plantations of the South. Dim figures bend down in the fields to plant, to chop, to pick the cotton from which the great wealth of the South has come. Sharecroppers, working year in, year out for the big landlord, never to get out of debt. The sharecropper’s wife—field worker by day, mother and housewife by night. Scrubbing the pine floors of the cabin until they shine white. Boiling clothes in the big black iron kettle in the yard. Cooking the fatty, hot corn pone for hungry little mouths. She has never to worry about leisure-time problems.

Over the whole land, Negro women meet this triple exploitation—as workers, as women, and as Negroes. About 85 percent of all Negro women workers are domestics, two-thirds of the two million domestic workers in the United States.

Other employment open to them is confined mainly to laundries and the tobacco factories of Virginia and the Carolinas, where working conditions are deplorable. The small fraction of Negro women in the professions is hampered by discriminatory practices and unequal wages.

It was against such a background that there assembled in Chicago on Feb. 14, 15 and 16, 1936, Negro women from all sections of the country for the National Negro Congress. They made up about one-third of the 800 delegates, men and women, who came together from churches, trade unions, fraternal, political, women’s, youth, civic, farm, professional, and educational organizations.

Women club leaders from California greeted women trade unionists from New York. Women school teachers made friends with women domestic workers. Women from the relief agencies talked over relief problems with women relief clients.

Women from mothers’ clubs and housewives’ leagues exchanged experiences in fighting against the high cost of living. Negro women welcomed the white women delegates who came to the Congress as an evidence of the growing sense of unity between them.

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Louise Thompson Patterson,
in CP USA journal Woman Today, April 1936. Edited for space.
Cooper believed in building an egalitarian society: “Ed Strong, Jim Jackson and Louis Burnham weren’t free of male chauvinism; [those men] don’t exist. But they were remarkable men. They struggled against it. The people I knew best fought for my leadership and pushed me forward.”

Cooper married James Jackson in 1941 but kept her maiden name. “I was an early advocate of women retaining their names,” she said. “I only started using Jackson during the McCarthy hearings when I had to go out and speak in his defense.”

Jackson, charged with advocating the overthrow of the US government, went into hiding in 1951 after being indicted under the Smith Act. He was a fugitive until 1955, a time Cooper calls “the underground period.”

Jackson was active in the Communist Party USA, but Cooper had no appetite for party politics. “I have never been an activist in the CP,” she said. “I always had a broader sphere. You have to be very strong to be politically active and politically honest.”

Cooper went to Birmingham in the summer of 1940, expecting to work at SNYC for just a few months. She stayed seven years. She was the face of the organization during the war years. She and other women didn’t just keep the organization running while men were fighting overseas, their involvement was intentional from the beginning. That strategy of inclusion served the organization well, ensuring that no talent was wasted and that SNYC would remain strong while its men were away.

“Women were vital to the group from its founding and especially during the tumultuous war years,” Lindsay Swindall notes in *The Path to the Greater, Freer, Truer World: Southern Civil Rights and Anticolonialism, 1937-1955*. “The prominent role of women in SNYC made it unique among civil rights organizations, which like the NAACP...were traditionally directed by men with a hierarchical leadership approach.”

Women’s strength within SNYC ensured that it didn’t just survive the war, she argues, but “came through the crisis robust enough to sponsor arguably its most significant national event in the autumn of 1946.”

Among the women holding leadership positions in SNYC were Rose Mae Catchings, who served as president, and Dorothy Burnham (married to Louis Burnham) who did dual duty as a member of the executive board and as educational director. Mayeaves, SC native Mary McLeod Bethune was an early supporter. The education advocate and founder of Bethune-Cookman University in Florida enjoyed a close relationship with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. She led the president’s Black Cabinet, advising him on racial matters.

SNYC was grateful for the national clout Bethune brought to the table. In 1945, they held a dinner to honor her years of dedication to the organization.

Modjeska Monteith Simkins was a SNYC organizer early on, working alongside Annie Belle Weston in Columbus. Simkins handled the press, organized speaking tours, and opened her home to travelling guests—a hospitality she often dispensed because blacks were barred from most motels.

Simkins also planned and invited students from around the state to SNYC’s Leadership Training Schools. The 10-day residential programs recruited young activists to study history, civics, and learn practical skills to strengthen their organizing work.

Weston travelled South Carolina’s back roads that summer, drumming up interest for the upcoming fall conference, especially from the “so-called backward communities.” Arming these neglected neighborhoods with educational programs, she believed, was critical to the movement. “We are living in an era of thought revolution and positive change. They, the Negroes, are waking up and learning to think. Women have begun trying to apply those lessons to their own relations with men.”

Swindall asserts that although SNCC had received important guidance from seasoned activists such as Ella Baker, women were largely absent from the leadership core of the national group.

“Without a doubt,” Swindall writes, “women were vital to the work of SNCC at the national local levels. However, the public voice and national agenda of SNCC was primarily expressed through men.”

“In contrast, SNYC’s public face, as seen in spaces like conference proceedings, delegations to Washington, letters to the federal government, and articles in *Cavalcade* [SNYC’s newsletter] was fashioned through the joint efforts of women and men activists.”
Recovering South Carolina’s Stolen Past

Forgetting Why We Remember


Most Americans know that Memorial Day is about honoring those who died in America’s wars. It is a holiday devoted to department store sales, half-marathons, picnics, baseball and auto racing. But where did it begin, who created it, and why?

At the end of the Civil War, Americans faced a formidable challenge: how to memorialize 625,000 dead soldiers, Northern and Southern. As Walt Whitman mused, it was “the dead, the dead, the dead—our dead—or South or North, ours all” that preoccupied the country. After all, if the same number of Americans per capita had died in Vietnam as died in the Civil War, four million names would be on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, instead of 58,000.

Officially, in the North, Memorial Day emerged in 1866 when the Grand Army of the Republic, the Union veterans’ organization, called on communities to conduct grave-decorating ceremonies. On May 30, funeral events attracted thousands of people at hundreds of cemeteries in countless towns, cities and mere crossroads. By the 1870s, one could not live in an American town, North or South, and be unaware of the spring ritual.

But the practice of decorating graves—which gave rise to an alternate name, Decoration Day—didn’t start with the 1866 events, nor was it an exclusively Northern practice. In 1866 the Ladies’ Memorial Association of Columbus, Ga., chose April 26, the anniversary of Gen. Joseph Johnston’s final surrender to Gen. William T. Sherman, to commemorate fallen Confederate soldiers. Later, both May 10, the anniversary of Gen. Stonewall Jackson’s death, and June 3, the birthday of Jefferson Davis, were designated Confederate Memorial Day in different states.

Memorial Days were initially occasions of sacred bereavement, and from the war’s end to the early 20th century they helped forge national reconciliation around solemnly sacrifice, regardless of cause. In North and South, orators and participants frequently called Memorial Day an “American All Saints Day,” likening it to the European Catholic tradition of whole towns marching to churchyards to honor dead loved ones.

But the ritual quickly became the tool of partisan memory as well, at least through the violent Reconstruction years. In the South, Memorial Day was a means of confronting the Confederacy’s defeat but without repudiating its cause. Some Southern orators stressed Christian notions of noble sacrifice. Others, however, used the ritual for Confederate vindication and new assertions of white supremacy. Blacks had a place in this Confederate narrative, but only as time-warped loyal slaves who were supposed to remain frozen in the past.

The Lost Cause tradition thrived in Confederate Memorial Day rhetoric; the Southern dead were honored as the true “patriots,” defenders of their homeland, sovereign rights, a natural racial order and a “cause” that had been overwhelmed by “numbers and resources” but never defeated on battlefields.

Yankee Memorial Day orations often righteously claimed the high ground of blood sacrifice to save the Union and destroy slavery. It was not uncommon for a speaker to honor the fallen of both sides, but still lay the war guilt on the “rebel dead.” Many a lonely widower and his surviving children expressed profound sorrow for the joyous death on the altars of national survival.

Some events even stressed the Union dead as the source of a new egalitarian America, and a civic rather than a racial or ethnic definition of citizenship. In Wilmington, Del., in 1869, Memorial Day included a procession of Methodists, Baptists, Unitarians and Catholics; white Grand Army of the Republic posts in parade with a black post; and the “Mount Vernon Cornet Band (colored)” stepping to “The Irish Nationalist with the harp and the sunburst flag of Erin.”

But for the earliest and most remarkable Memorial Day, we must return to where the war began. By the spring of 1865, after a long siege and prolonged bombardment, the beautiful port city of Charleston, S.C., lay in ruin and occupied by Union troops. Among the first soldiers to enter and march up Meeting Street singing liberation songs was the 21st United States Colored Infantry; their commander accepted the city’s official surrender.

Whites had largely abandoned the city, but thousands of blacks, mostly former slaves, had remained and they conducted a series of commemorations to declare their sense of the meaning of the war.

The largest of these events, forgotten until I had some extraordinary luck in an archive at Harvard, took place on May 1, 1865. During the final year of the war, the Confederates had converted the city’s Washington Race Course and Jockey Club into an outdoor prison. Union captives were kept in horrible conditions in the interior of the track; at least 257 died of disease and were hastily buried in a mass grave behind the grandstand.

After the Confederate evacuation of Charleston, black workmen went to the site, reburied the Union dead properly, and built a high fence around the cemetery. They whitewashed the fence and built an archway over an entrance on which they inscribed the words, “Martyrs of the Race Course.”

The symbolic power of this Low Country planter aristocracy’s bastion was not lost on the freed people, who then, in the generation with white missionaries and teachers, staged a parade of 10,000 on the track. A New York Tribune correspondent witnessed the event, describing it as “a procession of friends and mourners as South Carolina and the United States never saw before.”

The procession was led by 3,000 black schoolchildren carrying armloads of roses and singing the Union marching song “John Brown’s Body.” Several hundred black women followed with baskets of flowers, wreaths and crosses. Then came black men marching in cadence, followed by contingents of Union infantrymen. Within the cemetery enclosure a black children’s choir sang “We’ll Rally Around the Flag,” the “Star-Spangled Banner” and spirituals before a series of black ministers read from the Bible.

After the dedication, the crowd dispersed to a field and did what many of us do on Memorial Day: enjoyed picnics, listened to speeches and watched soldiers drill. Among the field of Union infantrymen participating were the famous 54th Massachusetts and the 34th and 104th United States Colored Troops, who performed a special double-collared march around the gravesite.

The war was over, and Memorial Day had been founded by African-Americans in a ritual of remembrance and consecration. The war, they had boldly announced, had been about the triumph of their emancipation over a slaveholders’ republic. They were themselves the true patriots.

Despite the size and some newspaper coverage of the event, its memory was suppressed by white Charlestonians in favor of their own version of the day. From 1876 on, after white Democrats took back control of South Carolina politics and the Lost Cause defined public memory and race relations, the day’s racism origin vanished.

Indeed, 51 years later, the president of the Ladies’ Memorial Association of Charleston received an inquiry from a United Daughters of the Confederacy official in New Orleans asking if it was true that blacks had engaged in such a burial rite in 1865; the story had apparently migrated westward in community memory. Mrs. S. C. Beckwith, leader of the association, responded tersely, “I regret that I was unable to gather any official information in answer to this.”

Beckwith may or may not have known about the 1865 event; her own “official” story had become quite different and had no place for the former slaves’ march on their masters’ racetrack. In the struggle over memory and meaning in some society, some stories just get lost while others attain mainstream recognition.

As we mark the Civil War’s sesquicentennial, we might reflect on Frederick Douglass’s words in an 1878 Memorial Day speech in Washington, D.C., in which he uncompromisingly gave voice to the forgotten Charleston marchers.

He said the war was not a struggle of mere “sectarian character,” but a “war of ideas, a battle of principles.” It was “a war between the old and the new, the slavery and freedom, barbarism and civilization … and in dead earnest for something beyond the battlefield.”

But for Frederick Douglass, we still debate the “something” that the Civil War’s dead represented.

The old racetrack is gone, but an oval roadway survives of one in Hampton Park, named for Wade Hampton, former Confederate general and the governor of South Carolina after the end of Reconstruction. The old gravesite of the Martyrs of the Race Course is gone too; they were reinterred in the 1880s at a national cemetery in Beaufort, SC.

But the event is no longer forgotten. Last year I had the great honor of helping a coalition of Charlestonians, including the mayor, Joseph P. Riley, dedicate a marker to this first Memorial Day by a reflection pool in Hampton Park. By their labor, their words, their songs and their solemn parade on their former owners’ racetrack, black Charlestonians created themselves, and for us, the Independence Day of a Second American Revolution.

David W. Blight teaches American History at Yale University where he is the director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition.
Joe Neal 1950–2017

Rev. Joe Neal leads a class at the Modjeska Simkins School in August 2015; the leadership institute’s first session. The school is a project of the SC Progressive Network, which Neal helped found in 1995.

He was a friend, pastor, teacher, mentor, legislator, and tireless champion of his constituents in Lower Richland.

This booklet is dedicated to his memory.

RESOURCES


The National Tamiment Library, Southern Negro Youth Communist Party oral histories, NYU

America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century, Frances FitzGerald, Boston, 1979.

We, Negro and white young people, one thousand strong, assembled in the Southern Youth Legislature at Columbia, South Carolina, do hereby declare our common purpose, to build a new and democratic South.

We are Southerners. We are united in a mutual love of the Southland, a belief in the democratic way of life and the Christian ideals of human brotherhood. We are united by pride in the traditions of the great Southern statesmen George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Douglass and Hiram Revels; and those nameless thousands who have always fought in the South against slavery and the oppression of man by man.

The sacrifice of millions of white and Negro youth who fought on the battlefields of Europe and Asia unite us. We are joined by our love and veneration for Franklin D. Roosevelt and the determination to realize the heritage he left us, his challenge to us, the generation which has a “rendezvous with destiny.”

We are united in righteous indignation and protest against the UnAmerican and UnChristian wave of mob violence, lynching and brutality in our Southland.

We are also bound by our common needs:
• secure and well-paid jobs
• the unrestricted right to vote
• to own the land we till
• adequate medical and hospital care
• homes for our families
• better education for all
• protection from mob violence and police brutality
• guarantee of a peaceful world, through the continuation of Roosevelt’s policy of collaboration with our wartime allies.

We have come to realize that only through acting together can we reach these goals. We are resolved no longer to be the victims of the old Nazi game of divide and rule. We have come to understand that discrimination against Negro youth—in all its forms—is but a device used by economic royalists and plantation landlords to cheat the young white people and our entire generation of Southern youth of the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in a democratic South.

We know that only when Negro youth achieve the full citizenship promised them in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, will our generation have earned by them in their patriotic devotion to the cause of democracy, only then can millions of young white people go forward and our Southland prosper. Our generation knows that these aspirations cannot be easily won, that only our common efforts and intelligent action, through organization of students, veterans, young workers and young women, will guarantee their achievement.

We know we must join together with all democratic minded groups in the South to go forward. Our generation today is faced with two alternatives: either a life of continued poverty, ignorance and division—or the opportunity, through unity, to build a free, prosperous and happy South, as part of a democratic America and a peaceful world. It is for this solemn reason that we who have a rendezvous with destiny pledge to join hands to realize the rich promise of the South.

We, who have liberated ourselves from the crippling bonds of race prejudice, call upon Southern youth in all walks of life to affix their signatures to this declaration of our purpose, and to join with us in common action to make our dream for a better South and a better America come true.

DONE THIS DAY, October 20, 1946, at Columbia, South Carolina

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RESOURCES


Equal Justice Initiative, Montgomery, AL. Download latest reports at eji.org.


Southern Negro Youth Congress archives, Howard University Libraries, Howard University, Washington, DC.


More resources are available at the Modjeska Simkins School for Human Rights web site: scpronet.com/modjeskaschool. Download free booklets, and find links to articles, blogs, and videos. Join us on Facebook.

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scpronet.com

Pact of Southern Youth

Drafted by delegates to the 1946 conference of the Southern Negro Youth Congress.

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DONE THIS DAY, October 20, 1946, at Columbia, South Carolina

More resources are available at the Modjeska Simkins School for Human Rights web site: scpronet.com/modjeskaschool. Download free booklets, and find links to articles, blogs, and videos. Join us on Facebook.
Renty was born in Congo and enslaved at B.F. Taylor plantation in Columbia, SC. Renty and his daughter Delia were part of a 1850 study by Columbia daguerreotypist J.T. Zealy at the behest of Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz. The study was intended to support the theory that blacks are a different—and inferior—species from whites.

This image was among 15 found at Harvard University in 1976. They are the earliest known photographs of identified enslaved Americans.

Agassiz was celebrated in his native Switzerland which, among other honors, named a mountain for him. In 2008, a public campaign culminated in the installation of a marker renaming the peak Rentyhorn “in honor of the slave Renty and of the men and women who have suffered similar fates.” The marker reminded readers that Agassiz was not just a great geologist and zoologist, “but also an influential racist and a pioneering thinker of apartheid.”