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Neglected: Some Say the U.S. is Ignoring the Commemoration of the Slave Trade's End

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Last year England lavishly celebrated the 200th anniversary of the abolishment of the slave trade. Although the system of purchasing human beings for money ended, slavery continued in British colonies. The country marked the bicentennial with a service at Westminster Abbey attended by the queen. The city of Liverpool, a former slave trading capital, opened the International Slavery Museum. Another British city, Bristol, spent almost \$800,000 to commemorate the end of this lucrative business.

Thomas Jefferson's bill abolishing the slave trade in this country took effect Jan. 1, 1808. The institution of slavery itself didn't end for several decades.

Celebrations surrounding the end of the slave trade in this country are muted compared to England's. President Bush signed a bill in February creating a national commission on the abolition of the slave trade, but it included no funding for festivities. The 17-day Spoleto Festival in Charleston, S.C., commemorated the bicentennial in May by focusing on the black experience.

Northampton's Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities is planning events around "Traces of the Trade: A Story From the Deep North," a documentary premiering Sunday on Channel 44. The film focuses on the DeWolfs, a prominent slave trading family in Rhode Island, and the struggles the descendants have coming to terms with that history. The Rhode Island Council for the Humanities -- inspired by "Traces of the Trade" and Brown University's research into the college's involvement in slavery -- developed an initiative on African-American heritage in the state, which includes a Freedom Festival Oct. 9-20 that will draw attention to the bicentennial and plans to develop a curriculum for 8th- to 12th-graders about the end of the slave trade.

But Rhode Island, which launched 60 percent of the United States' slave trading voyages, is the only state scheduling a myriad of events around this subject.

Linda Heywood, a history professor at Boston University who spoke last year at the University of London about slavery as part of the British festivities, organized three talks at BU to acknowledge the end of the business in this country. She is among a group of

people who are disappointed that this country has failed to recognize the occasion in a major way.

"I was very saddened," Heywood said. "This was an opportunity for us to again deal with the legacy of slavery. Public commemorations have a cathartic element to them. It brings people to some common emotional level where tensions are released."

As plans are being made for the 100th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth in 1809, there has been little discussion about the end of the slave trade. Critics say this is the result of a lack of knowledge about the history of slavery, and a fear among whites about discussing race. A bill pending in Congress encourages states and local governments to celebrate the impact the Declaration of Independence had on Lincoln's achievements.

The meager attention to the historical impact of the end of the slave trade also reflects the ambivalence this country had about ending slavery and the slave trade. After 1808 slaves continued to be an important part of the US economy, and businesses found ways to trade slaves illegally. While the British can summon moral pride in ending the slave trade, slavery didn't cease in the United States until 1865, and it took a Civil War for it to happen.

"People are terrified of being associated with slavery, in part because most Americans have no idea of just how thorough-going and pervasive the institution was in our society," says James Campbell, a professor of Africana Studies at Brown University, who chaired the group that explored Brown's history in slavery. "It's not the case of a few families, a few bad men, a few institutions. This is a trade. This is an institution which shaped every aspect of American society, culture, and economy for hundreds of years."

Katrina Browne, a DeWolf descendent who is director of "Traces of the Trade," said she believes New England's image as an abolitionist region blinds people to the 200 years when New Englanders participated in, and economically benefited from, slavery. Browne and nine relatives delved into this little-discussed part of their family history when they embarked on a journey from Bristol, R.I., where the DeWolfs operated slave ships and rum distilleries, to Africa, where the DeWolfs bought slaves, to Cuba, where the DeWolfs sold slaves and ran sugarcane plantations.

Massachusetts first entered the slave trade in 1638. Rhode Island soon moved to the forefront, with the DeWolfs becoming the largest slave trading family in US history. The activities not only enriched the DeWolfs; they benefited entire communities. Massachusetts shipbuilders constructed the ships. Insurance companies were developed to protect the trips, and banks were created where the middle class could buy shares in slave ships to make a profit.

England abolished the slave trade for moral reasons, at the behest of abolitionists, Campbell says. Although slavery persisted in the UK's Caribbean colonies - it was outlawed in the British Empire in 1833, but some slaves in the colonies didn't achieve freedom until 1838 - the British were proud of their efforts to end the slave trade, and that pride was reflected in celebrations last year.

The United States, however, has fewer reasons to be proud of ending the trade, since slavery continued to be an integral part of people's lives. Food grown in Connecticut, such as the Wethersfield onion, were sent to the Caribbean to feed enslaved Africans, says Browne. Rum and textile manufacturing thrived in New England because of the sugar, molasses, and cotton grown by slaves in the Caribbean and the American South. Rhode Island and Lowell textile mills manufactured a coarse, cheap cloth for slaves.

"People can often compartmentalize that you have the slaves in the South and you had the free North," said Marty Blatt, a historian at Boston National Historic Park. "You don't have to examine it too deeply to see that's a false separation. It was a national economy, and it's really fair to say and can be demonstrated that slavery was integral to the US economy."

Yet many whites resist discussing this aspect of history, which also can explain the lack of attention to the bicentennial. In 2001 Browne asked for permission to film inside Linden Place, the DeWolf family's ancestral Bristol home. Linden Place's former director refused, but its current leader launched an African-American heritage tour in May inspired by "Traces of the Trade" and Brown University's slavery and slave trade research.

Browne's relatives were equally hesitant to embrace this aspect of their history. She initially asked 200 family members if they'd be interested in following the trade route from Bristol to Africa to Cuba. One relative worried that his black colleagues would treat him differently if they knew about his background; he was also afraid he'd have to pay reparations.

Browne's grandmother, who had just entered a retirement home, was concerned that the black attendants would treat her differently if they discovered her history.

"It was a very human fear," Browne says, "and one that came from a lot of experience of not talking about these things."