

New museum would portray slave experience

E. RICHARD WALTON, Guest Columnist 1:02 a.m. EDT March 21, 2016



Former Charleston Mayor Joe Riley thinks we'd all be better off if we knew more about the roots of slavery beyond the obvious. He has said we'd know about the nation's African Americans — and therefore more about ourselves.

Riley and other leaders have marveled how families of the nine people slain last summer at Charleston's "Mother Emanuel" Church were able to "forgive" the 21-year-old gunman so soon after the massacre.

Riley said the descendants of slaves forgave "a bigot."

The former mayor said he wants to construct an International African American Museum in Charleston in the next few years. Budgeted at \$75 million, there's \$21 million still to be raised, he said. The museum would be built near the site where Africans originally arrived on slave ships from countries from Africa's western coast.

Riley discussed his ideas for the IAAM at a conference sponsored by Furman University's Riley institute.

The session, titled "One South Carolina," was held in Hilton Head this month. The institute offers diversity training to better equip managers to supervise in today's workplace. Some of those employees may have special needs, be transgender, women or people of color.

Charleston's mayor for 40 years, Riley stepped down in January and is focused on fundraising for IAAM, which will be a kind of Ellis Island of the South. Located in New York City's harbor, Ellis Island welcomed many immigrants coming from Europe to America.

"It'll be a great source of pride for all of us," he said of the IAAM. The museum is expected to capture much of the what the slaves and African Americans have experienced in the last 300 years.

There are wildly different estimates of the number of Africans who arrived here and who were enslaved.

Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., of Harvard University, estimates that 12 million left Africa, with 10 million arriving in America. Many perished from overcrowding or illness while en route. Some experts suggest that the average slave died just seven years after arriving, partly from the trauma, partly from non-stop, backbreaking work.

The IAAM is expected to cover not just slavery but much of the African American experience. Riley said many have an ancestral links to those who originally arrived in Charleston. There were others who disembarked in New Orleans, and still others went to the Caribbean and South America.

The IAAM will be designed to be a national resource to help develop teaching curriculums statewide and nationwide, he said.

"I don't think it'll be a more important building in South Carolina," he said.

In January, both Riley and Gov. Nikki Haley were honored by the Riley Institute for their extraordinary and timely leadership last summer following the massacre at Charleston's Emanuel African Methodist Church (one of the oldest churches of its type in America) and the removal of the Confederate flag from the Statehouse grounds in Columbia.

Also, Riley's presentation recalled a point one made by Jonathan Green, also of Charleston.

"I was never taught about slavery," Green said at a previous "One South Carolina" conference about two years ago.

Furman graduate and attorney, former Gov. Richard Riley, started the institute after serving as President Bill Clinton's secretary of education. Riley said when he returned to the state he realized that there were many leaders — CEOs, superintendents, pastors, principals, vice presidents — who were not able to supervise the new workforce.

The diversity training — about 45 per class — is offered in Greenville, Columbia and Charleston.

"One South Carolina" is an annual alumni weekend that brings together many of the 1,500 graduates of the diversity program. It's a statewide forum to discuss the pertinent issues of the day.

E. Richard Walton is an Upstate journalist who writes on a variety of subjects. He also serves on the board of directors of the Hispanic Alliance. His email address is harlemscribe@gmail.com.

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