

## Letter: Why talking about slavery is still important

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“Slavery happened so long ago, why do we need to deal with this now? We didn’t have anything to do with it, so why worry about it? It’s all past and let’s leave it there.”

This is a common refrain that I sometimes hear coming from our citizens in Bristol. It’s understandable that people might feel this way as the official emancipation of people of color occurred some 158 years ago with the acts of President Lincoln, and the ending of the Civil War. If all the problems of discrimination and inequities could have been swept away at that time; it’s likely we would not need any actions today, perhaps no need for any Bristol Memorial. But despite laws protecting civil rights being passed, inequities have persisted well into current times.

It is well known that much of Bristol’s early economy benefitted by the slave trade with the manufacturing and shipment of rum, and the financing of slave trading voyages. It all happened so long ago, so why must we rekindle and confront our past when, today, things are different?

Because it is up to us, today’s inhabitants of this area, that we account for the past in order to live more freely toward an equitable future. We residents of Bristol are direct and indirect descendants of the European colonists who benefitted by the slave trade, and we have a debt to account for.

The Bristol Middle Passage Port Marker Project seeks to reconcile and create a Memorial that is a symbol of healing and peace. The Bristol Memorial will acknowledge the role of Bristol in the Middle Passage, and pay due homage to those of African and Indigenous ancestry who were so impacted. By recognizing our past, we may bring a sense of closure to this dark period in our town’s history. By witnessing and honoring the many who suffered, we may bring a new opening, a period of fuller understanding of human rights and a more secure and equitable system for all the people who live here today, regardless of origins or background. This is the true meaning of the intended Bristol Memorial, a community project that acts as a touchstone for all of us.

We can together close the past by marking this remembrance, and the Memorial will become more than a symbolic sculpture on our waterfront. It will be a true gesture toward the peace we recognize in the present, in striving for a more equitable society, especially for those who follow us.

Our children will be proud of us for taking these bold steps of reconciliation and healing. Let us close our past by opening our future together.

Stephan Brigid

