Lawyer transforms plantation into slavery museum

BY MIMI READ
Special to The Advocate

Wallace — At Whitney Plantation, one of the antebellum estates that line the Great River Road between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, the architectural centerpiece is a Creole-style main house where hand-painted ceilings are adorned with flowers and vines. Out front are a matching pair of pigeoniers and an alley of oak trees whose branches theatrically drag the ground.

It’s easy to imagine a typical moonlight-and-magnolias tour unfolding here, with guides in hoop skirts expounding on the antiques — except that Whitney’s owner, John Cummings, will have none of that.

“Who in the hell built this house?” Cummings thundered recently while ferreting a couple of visitors around Whitney’s 250 acres in a golf cart through the rain. “Who built this son of a bitch? We have to own our history.”

During its economic heyday, Whitney Plantation encompassed 1,700 acres, most of it planted in sugarcane. The Haydel family, who founded the estate, was one of the largest slaveholders in Louisiana. In 1860, they owned 101 black slaves, all of them listed on a household inventory according to first names, ages, genders, complexion, skill sets and countries of origin. Two of the 101 were maroons, or runaways, presumed to be hiding in a nearby swamp.

On Dec. 7, if all goes well, Cummings will open the 1790s plantation to the public as America’s first and only museum of slavery. Although many museums dedicated to African-American history exist in this country, with important new ones in the works including the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., none of them focuses solely on slavery.

Cummings bought Whitney in 1998 from a petrochemical company intent on razing it, and he has spent more than $7 million of his own money restoring and renovating it.

He resists delving into deep explanations of what drove him to pursue this project. But one thing seems clear: He wants to provoke moral outrage. Weeping tourists won’t surprise or alarm him.

“When you leave here,” he said, “you’re not going to be the same person who came in.”

Cummings has moved 19th-century buildings pertinent to his mission from various locations to the Whitney site, including numerous slave cabins, a latticed 1868 steel jail similar to the type used to restrain slaves and a shingled African-American church.

These days, though, the preservation community frowns on moving buildings out of their original contexts.

“It’s sort of like taking the frame off a Rembrandt, keeping the frame and getting rid of the artwork,” explained New Orleans preservation architect Robert Cangelosi Jr., of Koch and Wilson Architects, a firm that has worked on several area plantations. “You must have integrity of site and location. Imagine moving a plantation from a rural setting to downtown New Orleans because the tourism is greater — it’s just not appropriate.”

A different mandate

Cummings, however, has his ear cocked to a different sort of mandate. Inside these structures and across Whitney’s landscape, he has installed exhibits and memorials about slavery that he conceived himself and created in collaboration with artists, scholars and researchers.

The milky-white Antioch Baptist Church, for example, donated and moved to the site in pieces from the town of Paulina, is filled with dozens of realistic ceramic statues of slave children in tattered clothing. Cummings commissioned them to create a more stirring, lifelike experience. “I want to have the innocence of children, so that you, as a white person, will open your heart and listen to me,” he said to one visitor.

He also commissioned a clay bust near the altar that depicts Pope Nicholas V, whose 15th-century edict sanctioned the right of the Portuguese people to enslave black Africans. “In perpetuity!” Cummings added in tones of indignation as he recounted papal history.

Cummings is not alone. Museums across the country have elevated and expanded their presentations about the history of slave populations.

“It’s a phenomenon that’s been 30 years in the making,” said Julia Rose, the director of the West Baton Rouge Museum and an expert on the subject. Rose is writing a book, “Interpreting Difficult History,” about representing slavery and other traumatic episodes in the context of museum education.

“It’s a result of the rise of social history — the idea that the history of the common man is as important as the long-standing national narrative of well-known heroes and founding fathers.”

“There’s so much incredible work going on, you would just be floored,” Rose went on. “Monticello has done a tremendous job (of incorporating slave history), and so have Colonial Williamsburg and the Smithsonian. The Hermitage in Nashville has done archaeology and archival research into its slave community. Visitors are coming away moved, energized, interested and empathetic. Historical empathy is going to transform tourism. Historic sites and museums will eventually be a loss if they’re not interested in slavery.”

The only story

On the local level, Laura Plantation, Oak Alley and others have stepped up their games by adding narratives about slavery to their standard tours. Still, Whitney Plantation is wondrously singular. It’s unlike any other plantation or antebellum historic house because, in Cummings’ hands, slavery is positioned front and center. For him, it’s the only story worth telling.

Moreover, the newly conceived Whitney is eccentrically and boldly personal. Superimposed on the peaceful plantation setting is one man’s creative, uninhibited and sometimes disturbingly graphic vision about how slavery ought to be dramatized.

“Everybody has to do something,” said Cummings, white-haired but still vigorous at 77, as he gazed over a former sugarcane field, now occupied by a maze of black granite walls where the names of...
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Stylish and condo hotels are well-known. Cummings, whose sons, Sean and WhitneY, were slaves. Some of dozens of slaves found in the Library of Congress. In effect, they're little everyday stories about how it looked, felt and tasted to be a slave.

Unlikely crusader

On the surface, Cummings seems an unlikely crusader on the subject of slavery. White and wealthy, he is neither a historian nor a museum professional. Rather, he's a retired trial lawyer and real estate developer who has been known to drop six figures at a single sale at Neal Auction Co. while shopping for antiques to display at Whitney. A confirmed real estate addict, he owns 3,000 acres in New Orleans East, 6,000 acres in St. John Parish and many buildings in the Central Business District, Bywater and other New Orleans neighborhoods. One of his sons, Sean Cummings, is a well-known New Orleans developer whose hotels and condo buildings are among the most stylish and architecturally arresting perches in the city.

Pugnacious and warm by turns, John Cummings began by answering even generic questions from a reporter with the words "I'm not telling you" and "none of your business," and ended with friendly taps on the shoulder for emphasis, amiable off-color jokes and a conciliatory parting kiss on the cheek. Because of all these facts and facets of his personality, some people have doubted his motives. "I've had to be prepared to meet every confrontation," he said. "I've been questioned: 'White boy, are you using slavery to make money?' The answer is no.

"It's a normal question," he conceded. "Why would a white man be doing this, for Christ's sake? Why am I taking their heritage?"

Cummings has actually been shouldering the African-American cause for decades. In the early 1960s, when Victor Schiro was mayor of New Orleans, the city closed the giant Audubon Park swimming pool rather than integrate it. Cummings worked with other locals to successfully open it as an integrated facility. "I've always been involved in matters like that — I was attracted to them," he said.

"No one appeared to me on horseback and struck me off — that didn't happen," Cummings said when asked about how he got the idea to found a slavery museum. "But I have a brain. And I have many friends who are African-American. It became important to me to have the history of slavery researched and recognized, to convey untold stories of their humanity.

"Education is the takeaway here, including the education of African-Americans, so they can realize how badly the deck was stacked against them," he said.

Gutsy imagery

Cummings' staff at Whitney has obtained the oral histories of about 4,000 Louisiana slaves, most of them compiled by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. Their lives are described in painful detail. Bits of the oral histories will be transcribed on the walls of the visitors' center, but Cummings hopes eventually to record various celebrities reading from them and to make the recordings available to visitors via headsets.

Employees at Whitney also are working on an international database that will allow African-Americans whose families were scattered by slavery to research their lineages. Cummings is not afraid to convey pitiful losses or horrifying violence with gutsy imagery.

His "Field of Angels" is a quiet circular courtyard listing the names of 2,200 slave babies in St. John Parish who died before their third birthdays. As a focal point, he commissioned a bronze statue of an African-American angel carrying an infant. The fact that the female angel is bare-breasted might muddy the waters for some, but Cummings shrugged it off. "I had nothing to do with that. It wasn't any prurient interest of mine," he said. "The artist conceived it. Why isn't Michelangelo's 'David' wearing a jockstrap? I guess that's the way the artist wanted it."

To create what could be Whitney Plantation's most extraordinary memorial, Cummings asked Ohio artist Woodrow Mast to make 63 ceramic African-American heads. As of last week, they weren't all finished, but several of the gleaming heads already had been mounted on tall, slender steel rods near the edge of a peaceful lagoon, where they're reflected in the water. When breezes blow, the heads on stalks sway gently.

Elaborately pruned banana trees dot the landscape around the installation, belying the fact that it commemorates the German Coast uprising of 1811, the largest slave rebellion in American history, which erupted just a few miles from Whitney. The revolt ended with the beheadings of dozens of slaves. Some of their severed heads were brandished on pikes around neighboring plantations to deter future uprisings, according to many accounts.

Just one step

Ibrahima Seck, a Senegalese scholar and author whom Cummings hired to chronicle the history of slavery at Whitney, stood at the water's edge recently and considered the haunting assemblage.

"It will be shocking, strange and powerful," he said. "This will be the last thing people will see before they leave, the last blow. It will knock you out."

Cummings said he plans to keep expanding the museum's offerings and might even open a second facility.

"I'm hoping to put the civil rights museum on the other side of the highway," he said. He's mulling over the idea of donating Whitney Plantation to the Smithsonian, and at the same time he's considering forming a foundation that would be controlled by the colleges of Louisiana, which would run it. "They could use all of their talents and institutions to make the history of slavery commonplace knowledge," Cummings said. "But even if I'm successful," he added, "it's just one step in a thousand-mile journey."
The Whitney Plantation in Wallace is set to open Dec. 7.