Old, new U.S. citizens celebrate 229th anniversary of Constitution’s signing

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Under the shaded patio between V.L. Wharton and Judice-Rickels Hall on Thursday, Sept. 14, 229 years after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, students, faculty, Lafayette residents and families watched 15 immigrants become citizens.

Part of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette annual celebration of the U.S. Constitution, the naturalization ceremony was accompanied by lectures and panels during the day, including one about Lafayette Parish’s history of slavery.

Celebrated annually, either on Sept. 17 (the date of the Constitution’s signing) or the weekdays leading up to the anniversary, the celebration touches on issues the U.S. faces today.

“Constitution Day is celebrated every year at UL with the reading of the U.S. Constitution and its amendments, afternoon presentations and panels,” explained Julia Frederick, Ph.D., director of the honors program and member of the Constitution Day Committee.

Following the introduction to the celebration by Rick Swanson, Ph.D., interim political science department chair, was the reading of the Constitution and its amendments by students and faculty. Attendees could follow along by picking up one of the free, personal-sized U.S. Constitutions that were available. Along with the pocket-sized documents, free pizza was available for those who stayed.

People sat in the shade and listened to the Constitution while some registered to vote at the tent set up by the League of Women Voters — a nonpartisan organization which has attended Constitution Day at UL Lafayette every year since the celebration began.

“The youth are such a golden treasure for the U.S., and they need to be involved at an early age and we need to listen to what’s important,” said Cathy Andrews, a volunteer with the League of Women Voters.

The UL Lafayette chapter of Young Americans for Liberty, a libertarian organization on campus that champions free speech, also passed out free Constitutions to passersby.

Once the Constitution was read in its entirety, there was a break in events until the afternoon.

The next event of the day took place in the H.L. Griffin Hall auditorium.

In a transition from greeter to lecturer, Swanson, who recently presented at TEDxVermilionStreet, commanded the attention of about 70 audience members as he gave a presentation on “The History of Black Civil Rights in Lafayette Parish, 1724-1971.”

Refuting misconceptions surrounding Lafayette residents’ treatment of slaves, the Acadians’ predisposition toward owning slaves and locals’ fondness of slave owning, Swanson explained the South really was fighting for slavery during the Civil War. He provided facts for his statements with quotes and statistics he found during his years of research.

Following his lecture, Swanson joined UL Lafayette professors in a panel discussion about the removal of Confederate statues around the state and country. D’Weston Haywood, Ph.D., assistant professor of African American history; Maria Seger, Ph.D., assistant professor of English; Ian Beamish, Ph.D., assistant professor of history and Swanson delineated occurrences of statue removal, and the panel concluded the day’s events.

Constitutions to passersby.

Photos by Midori Mickel/The Vermilion


Civil rights history sheds light on area’s racial past

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In his panel dispelling myths of Lafayette Parish’s lack of slave activity, political science interim department chair Rick Swanson, Ph.D., laid down hard facts to swallow about Acadians’ comfort in buying and enslaving African slaves.

Titled “The History of Black Civil Rights in Lafayette Parish 1724-1971” and followed by a panel discussion on “The Jim Crow Monuments Controversy,” with his fellow professors, Swanson said the information in the presentation was gathered from “obscure places.”

This clashes with our perceived image of Acadian people exclusively building what is now present-day Acadiana. It is important to recognize that African slaves had a large role in building Lafayette Parish. Slaves, for the most part, were responsible for the success of our agrarian economy.

“It all came from a slave-based economy,” Swanson said. “Slavery was more deeply ingrained in Lafayette Parish than the rest of Louisiana or the South on average.”

This is substantial, given nearly all of the pre-Civil War South depended on slavery for its economic success.

According to The American Interest, “Of every hour of useful work done in the Southern States (1850), roughly 40 minutes was performed by a slave.”

Swanson also wanted to dispel the myth that the Cajuns did not own slaves. In fact, Swanson said, “many Cajuns owned slaves.” 68 percent of slave owners were French or Acadian in Lafayette Parish.
Swanson’s presentation then continued into the Civil War. According to the presentation, 80 percent of Lafayette Parish voted for the pro-slavery candidate in the 1860 election. Swanson also clarified why the South seceded from the Union. “The South fought to keep 4 million people enslaved because of their skin color,” Swanson said.

Swanson circulated handouts containing quotes from Confederate leadership, all of which cited slavery as the reason for the war. “No bill of attainder, ex post facto law, or law denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves shall be passed,” the Confederate Constitution reads.

The reasons for the war aren’t only clear to Swanson. National news sources reported similar information in wake of Charlottesville. An article in the Huffington Post states that “Alexander Stephens, vice president of the Confederacy, said the Southern states would fight to keep ‘the negro’ in ‘his place’ in a hard-to-misread statement on the day the Civil War began.”

Swanson also touched on the Jim Crow era in Lafayette. He revealed that one-fourth of the adult white male population were in the White League (a white terrorist organization) in 1874 in Lafayette Parish. “(White terrorist groups) took out ads in the Lafayette Advertiser,” Swanson noted.

Swanson continued to state some of the Jim Crow laws that were in effect in Lafayette Parish. He said segregation went as far as Mardi Gras, in which gloves weren’t allowed, because in full costume race could only be distinguished by the hands. “Lafayette Parish, in 1915, made interracial friendship a crime,” Swanson cited.

Swanson even went as far to point out racial exclusion in the Lafayette flag, a flag that holds French symbolism but no West African representation. Swanson said these transgressions don’t only exist in the past, they linger today.

“We have de facto segregated schools and neighborhoods,” Swanson said.

After the presentation, Takuna Maulana EL’Shabazz, an attendee, stood up and pointed out that Mr. Ragin’ Cajun, the university’s mascot when he was a student, excluded black students at UL Lafayette. He said the switch from the bulldog to Mr. Ragin’ Cajun as a mascot received a lot of backlash from the black student population.

EL Shabazz, who wrote a book titled “Black I am! Cajun/Creole I am NOT!” made a solid point terms such as “Cajun” exclude many African Americans, who associate the term with white southerners in Acadiana.

The panel on the Confederate monuments began at 3:15 p.m. It started with a discussion of the context of such monuments. For example, the General Mouton statue in downtown Lafayette was erected in 1922 during the Jim Crow Era. “1922 is when lynchings are peaking around the South,” Swanson noted.

These monuments were erected to intimidate African Americans during the Civil Rights movement and the Jim Crow era, or at least it seems so due to the timing of the statues as well as statements made about the statues.

The panel pointed out that the General Mouton statue was said to honor the “Southern Race” during its ceremony. The panel also agreed the people who turn to violence to defend the monuments says a lot about what the monuments mean to certain groups.

“Why are these neo-nazis and fascists rallying behind these statues?” Assistant English Professor Maria Seger, Ph.D. said.

The panel concluded on why acknowledging reality is crucial to our success as a region, and that monuments should probably be placed in museums rather than public spaces. They agreed our history has been rewritten and hidden from us intentionally.

“It’s a narrative that was reconstructed from the start,” Assistant History Professor Ian Beamish, Ph.D. said.