A PECULIAR INSTITUTION

ON A LOUISIANA PLANTATION, A WEALTHY WHITE LAWYER HAS SPENT 15 YEARS BUILDING THE FIRST MUSEUM DEDICATED TO THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN SLAVERY.

By David Amsden

Photographs by Mark Peckmezian
LOUISIANA'S RIVER ROAD runs northwest from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, its two lanes snaking some 100 miles along the Mississippi and through a contradictory stretch of America. Flat and fertile, with oaks webbed in Spanish moss, the landscape stands in defiance of the numerous oil refineries and petrochemical plants that threaten its natural splendor. In the rust-scarred towns of clapboard homes, you are reminded that Louisiana is the eighth-poorest state in the nation. Yet in the lush sugar plantations that crop up every couple of miles, you can glimpse the excess that defeated the region before the Civil War. Some are still active, with expansive fields yielding 13 million tons of sugar a year. Others stand in states of elegant rot. But most conspicuous are those that have been restored for tourists, transporting them into a world of bygone Southern grandeur— one in which mint juleps, manicured gardens and hoop skirts are emphasized over the fact that such grandeur was made possible by the enslavement of black human beings.

On Dec. 7, the Whitney Plantation, in the town of Wallace, 30 miles west of New Orleans, celebrated its opening. It was clear, based on the crowd entering the freshly painted gates, that the plantation intended to provide a different experience from those of its neighbors. Roughly half of the visitors were black. Amidst its lush surroundings, visitors were treated to a 21st-century example of reparations: a museum that could not be missed, that had been created by black art, that could not be ignored.

David Driskell— he dresses in a draped in a manner that suggests a morning hour of cocktail drinking and the preparation of a dinner for someone of wealth— has devoted his life to talking about the story of slavery— the first of its kind in the United States. Located on land where slaves worked for more than a century, in a state where they are the sight of the rusty bars of the plantation, the rusted hulks of iron kettles that were used by slaves to boil sugar, the museum is the result of decades of community outreach

"LIKE EVERYONE ELSE," John Cummings said a few days earlier, "you're probably wondering why the rich white boy has been up here to talk about this. He was driving around the Whitney in his Ford SUV, making sure the museum would be ready. The building was raised in New Orleans as a slave trading warehouse that dominates the plantation. He is 72 but projects the unmet temperament of a teenager. His disposition is exceedingly proper and open, he said, with a hint of white heat, with his being the scrappiness of the Irish Catholics who flooded New Orleans in the 19th century. But as a trial lawyer who has helped win more than $900 million in multimillion-dollar cases, he is skilled at telling the story of slavery— a tale that has been left behind by the rest of the world.

In 1867, the Whitney Plantation was sold to John S. and Mary B. Huffman. The house was reconstructed on a nearby street and the slaves were moved to the south side of the river. The slaves worked in the fields and on the plantations and were paid by the slaveholder.

The museum opened in fall 2016. It consists of several buildings, including a 20th-century house and a 19th-century barn. The museum is located on a former slave plantation and includes a museum building, a slave quarters, and a research center. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and admission is $15 per person. The museum is located at 3745 Whitney Blvd., New Orleans, LA 70119. For more information, visit www.whitneyplantation.org.
about the way the place came together says that it shouldn't work," says Laura Rosanne Alderete, a Tulane history professor specializing in slavery who has visited the Whitney twice and opened it. "And yet for the most part it does, superbly and even radically. Like Maya Lin's memorial, the Whitney has figured out a way to mourn those we as a society are often reluctant to remember. Before leaving the grounds, Cummings stopped at the edge of the property's small lagoon. It was here that the Whitney's most provocative project will be envisioned and, with any luck, completed. Cummings completed, one dedicated to the victims of the Great Cane Uprising, an event rarely mentioned in American history before. In 1811, some 1,400 slaves walked off their plantations and, dressed in makeshift military garb, began marching in revolt on River Road toward New Orleans. This idea was then called the Louisiana State Fair for the high German immigrant, like the Haydels. The slaves were suppressed by militiamen after two days, with about 95 killed; some during a Dallas police show trial that followed. As a warning to other slaves, dozens were decapitated, their heads placed on spikes along River Road and in New Orleans, to which is now, lackadaisically, the French Quarter. "It'll be optional. O.K. Not for the kids," said Cummings, who, commissioned Woodrow Nash, an African-American sculptor he met at Jazz Fest, to make a headstone-into-ceramic, which will be set atop stainless-steel rods on the lagoon's small island. "But if you're worried about people getting lost, you can have them follow the lagoon's edge. The last thing you're going to hear before leaving here will be beheaded slaves." The memorial had lately become a source of controversy among locals, who were concerned that it would be too disturbing. "It is disturbing," Cummings said as he pulled out past Whitney's gate, "but you know what it is? It's new. And I'm hoping right here on this road."

The National building museum to understand its own history and to have its stories told in a common space and language to address collectively what is too difficult to process individually. Forty-eight years after World War II, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opens the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks opened its doors in Lower Manhattan less than 12 years after they occurred. One hundred and fifty years after the end of the Civil War, the federal era dedicated to slavery is now. No monument honors America's slaves. It's something left up all the time in my lectures," says Eric Foner, a Columbia University historian and one of the authors of the Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Drama of American Slavery." "If the German built a museum dedicated to American slavery before one about their own Holocaust, they'd probably be trying to get the rest of the world to terms with slavery. To some, it's ancient history. To others, it's history that isn't quite history." These competing perceptions converge in Rice Village, the southernmost section of the City of Houston. The State of Texas word comes to acknowledge the 150th Amend-}
I was supposed to write about America for an American newspaper, and the last thing I wanted was to seem like an introverted European complaining about how awful everything was here.

Peter had done some research and found a bowling alley where they served food and also put on concerts. During dinner, we decided to leave Detroit the next morning and head for Minnesota. “We could drive up along the lake, that’s supposed to be a very scenic route,” Peter said. I was rather uplifted by the prospect. I was supposed to write about America for an American newspaper, and the last thing I wanted was to seem like an introverted European complaining about how awful everything was here. I wanted to see something magical, I wanted to see something beautiful; I wanted to write about being blown away by the power and freedom of this country.

I might even experience something representative this very evening. Three bands were playing, and what better place was there to experience American music than Detroit, the birthplace of Motown and home of Iggy Pop and the Stooges?

When the first band came on stage, I realized that it wasn’t going to happen. They played some kind of blues rock, with reference to the sound of early 1970s, Grateful Dead-ish, but in a high-school-graduation-party kind of way. The band knew how to play, but they knew how to play the way 14- and 15-year-olds know how to play.

Was this for real?

Weren’t we in Detroit?

After the show, we crossed the snowy street with our heads down and got into the car. As Peter pushed the ignition, I hoped he wasn’t as drunk as I was. On the other hand, it was just a couple of blocks over to the hotel. But apparently we weren’t going there; he continued down the road, looking for a liquor store. I stayed in the car and sat there smiling while he shopped.

We continued drinking in Peter’s room. He tore the phone loose and used it as a window stopper, so we could smoke without being fined, and handed me his book with photos of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which he had covered for a decade, and of the lives of the veterans back in the U.S. I leafed through it while I tried to come up with something to say to him. I ended up saying that he sought complexity, not the iconic, and that this gave his photos enormous distinction. The expression on his face didn’t change when I said it, so it was impossible to tell whether I had pleased or insulted him.

He put the book on the bed and opened a new beer.

“So what’s your position on the question of God?” he asked.

I got up, put out my cigarette and set the half-empty beer can on the coffee table.

“I think I’ll go to bed now,” I said. “It’s been a long day.”

The second half of “My Saga” will appear in the March 15 issue of the magazine.

Knousgaard

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the warm car, I could still feel it, as if it was close by all the time and only needed a few seconds of ice-cold air to get activated, causing my muscles to contract, my teeth to chatter.

The guy was standing there again, a dark outline against the gray-black sky thick with heavy snowflakes.

“Shall we go?” I shouted.

Peter nodded and got in. He plotted in the address of the hotel while the car rolled slowly downhill.

“It’s right around here somewhere,” he said.

The hotel room was small, neat and beautiful, but ice-cold. I lay under the covers for a while without being able to get warm. The wind howled and whistled in the street outside, occasionally the walls creaked, snowflakes hurtled through the air in the glare of the streetlights. I took off my clothes and got in the shower, turned it to maximum heat and stood there, immobile under the stream of warm water, for 20 minutes. That helped. Then I brewed myself a cup of coffee, drank it and lay back down on the bed.

I’d seen poverty before, of course, even incomprehensible poverty, as in the slums outside Maputo, in Mozambique. But I’d never seen anything like this. If what I had seen tonight — house after house after house abandoned, deserted, decaying as if there had been disaster — if this was poverty, then it must be a new kind poverty, maybe in the same way that the wealth that had amassed here in the 20th century had been a new kind of wealth. I had never really understood how a nation that so celebrated the individual could obliterate all differences the way this country did.

In a system of mass production, the individual workers are replaceable and the products are identical. The identical cars are followed by identical gas stations, identical restaurants, identical motels and, as an extension of these, by identical TV screens, which hang everywhere in this country, broadcasting identical entertainment and identical dreams. Not even the Soviet Union at the height of its power had succeeded in creating such a unified, collective identity as the one Americans lived their lives within. When times got rough, a person could abandon one town in favor of another, and that new town would still represent the same thing.

Was that what home was here? Not the place, not the local, but the culture, the general?

When my mother went to school, her textbooks described Norway as one of the poorest countries in Europe. Her father’s brother Magnus immigrated to the U.S., like many others from that area and that time: Between 1825 and 1928, roughly 800,000 Norwegians came to America, nearly all of them to get away from poverty, cramped living conditions and unemployment. They adopted the new culture in different ways. Some gave their new towns Norwegian names, celebrated Norwegian feast days and maintained all of the Norwegian traditions. Others became Americans the moment they set foot on American soil. My grandfather’s older brother was one of the latter; he met a Norwegian girl on the boat, they fell in love and when they parted ways — she settled in Chicago and found work as a domestic servant for a wealthy family, while he picked up odd jobs farther north, in and around Grafton, N. D., they wrote letters to each other in English. When they got back together, married and had children, they never spoke Norwegian to them, only English. Those kids were going to be Americans.

Magnus waited more than 40 years before he went back to the Old Country. That doesn’t mean he didn’t have feelings for his place of birth. In a letter he sent from Grafton to his family in Norway, in December 1928, he wrote:

This Saturday evening I went to the Cinematograph and saw the Norwegian motion picture “The Bridal Procession in Hardanger.” When I saw Bergen and Bygstad, Flatrøker, etc., I felt such a powerful longing that I could not hold my tears back. There were many people crying at the Strand Theatre that night.

No one knows what Salbu and Afjorden are like and what they are worth, until they are thousands of miles away. I have so many memories of home and the life of our village that I sometimes weep for joy when I think ahead to the day when we shall meet again.

I met Magnus only once, almost 60 years after he wrote that letter. He was visiting his brother, my grandfather, at my grandfather’s little farm back in Norway. They looked very much alike, both were talkative and merry, but at the same time, there was a gap between them. Magnus spoke with an American accent, and when I saw him sitting alone on the bench outside the house one evening, overlooking the fields, he looked like a stranger. It must have been Grafton he was longing for then.