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Nashville Slave Market Historical Marker Unveiling on December 7, 2018: Dedicatory Remarks

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The Nashville Slave Market
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First, I want to take a moment to say thanks. Thanks to everyone at the Tennessee Historical Commission for approving this much-needed marker, to Linda Wynn for making the submission of the proposal a relatively easy process, and thanks to each of you for showing up to share this moment today.

I also want to say thanks to all the folks out there in the community whoupon hearing about a hiccup with funding this marker asked “How much do you need, Doc?” and opened up their wallets and purses in order to make this day a reality. This marker would have been an unfulfilled dream without you.

Last, I want to say thank you to the students that were enrolled in my Black Nashville course, a class that consisted of seven young people who asked hard questions, made astute observations, and helped me gain a deeper understanding of Public History. In short, it was a conversation about the lack of African Americans’ representation in this city’s public spaces and a challenge to me to see if there was something I could do that led to this moment. So again, I’d like to thank my students, my #Tigerstorians for your drive, passion, and desire to reshape Nashville’s historic landscape and for making the marginalized, obfuscated, and invisible, visible. I am deeply honored to call you my students.

This marker accomplishes two things. First, it links the brokerage houses that lined this street from where we are standing to the public square, the courthouse, and many of the business adjacent to it to the buying and selling of human beings. If , as one historian has argued, enslaved

African Americans represented the most valuable form of property in the South, then in Nashville, they represented this city's first big business. Nashville's status as the Volunteer State's second largest slave port suggests that business was booming, and one would be hard pressed to find a business in this area that did not benefit from the trade in human flesh.

The second thing I'd like you to consider this afternoon is the fact that this was a place that generated tremendous profits, but it also was a space that was characterized by humiliation, loss, and despair. Millie Simkins gives us a glimpse into this reality during the 1930s when she described African Americans in this yard being stripped naked and required to roll down a nearby hill to demonstrate that they were healthy. Other experiences that occurred in these spaces are less explicit, but leaves us with questions that have answers we'd like to ignore. For example, in a shop not far from where we are standing, a seven year old boy was sold. As I imagined his life before his arrival here, I wondered about his mother and the last conversation she had with him before he arrived. Did she have to deceive him about his fate? What sort of lasting effect would this have on his life? Surely, depression, anger, resentment, attachment issues, and post-traumatic stress disorder became issues those who passed through these spaces had to grapple with. As I take time to consider this place, I hear a mother's wail, as she realizes that she is to be separated from the child she just gave birth to only three years earlier. When I consider this space, I think about the fancy girls, women whose only purpose in life was to be for the sexual gratification of their enslavers. How did they comfort themselves and prepare for the life they knew was ahead? When I consider this space, I think about the very young girls who were sold here. Children whose prospective buyers eyed them lustily while considering the number of children they could bring into the world before their bodies gave out.

When I consider this space, I think about the free black residents of Nashville who are unable to assist those whom they know are suffering. What affect did the auctioneer's call have on them as they simultaneously valued and devalued black lives? How did they respond to the screams, tears, and fervent prayers they must have heard coming from these spaces?

Last, when I think of this space, I wonder what it reveals about us as a city and state, that it could take 153 years before we make a public statement that affirms the humanity of those whose lives were torn asunder here and whose memories and names have been all but erased from the public record.

Today we say to our ancestors "we acknowledge your pain, we recognize your strength, and we honor your sacrifice."