

## Revolution and Reaction: Sites of Memory and the 1811 German Coast Uprising in the Twenty-First Century

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“Always keep in mind the African proverb: ‘Until the lion writes his own story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.’” – Albert Thrasher in *“On to New Orleans!”*<sup>1</sup>

Until March 17, 2017, the Woodland Plantation, just off Highway 628 in La Place, Louisiana was up for sale. The real estate agent, Tom King, listed the residence as a five-bedroom, six-bathroom beautiful plantation home built in the “French Creole Style” by Manuel Andre back in 1793. Despite this historic charm, Mr. King was forced to admit that the property “[had] been neglected for 10+ years” and had no running water or electricity.<sup>2</sup> In other words, a real fixer upper. Originally priced at \$550,000 for the home and the surrounding 3.7 acres, Woodland was sold for \$350,000 to Timothy P. Sheehan.<sup>3</sup> It remains unknown whether Mr. Sheehan intends to renovate his property at 1128 Highway 628/River Road. It also remains unknown whether Mr. Sheehan was aware of the historic value of Farm Lot 31.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Mr. Sheehan had stumbled upon – whether knowingly or not – the site on which the largest slave rebellion in American history began.

In January 1811 on the same piece of land that is now owned by Mr. Sheehan, a group of twenty-five enslaved people, led by Charles Deslondes, escaped captivity and proceeded to march towards New Orleans to demand their freedom. Along the way, Deslondes and his crew would recruit between 200 and 500 fellow slaves and free people of color, upending – if but temporarily – the slavocracy that dominated Louisiana.<sup>5</sup> In what would become known as the German Coast Uprising, the rebels under Deslondes would destroy their sites of enslavement, burning at least five plantations and killing two white people. For a few short days, Deslondes and his rebels materialized the worst fears of a white society built on the backs of black slaves:

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Thrasher, *“On to New Orleans!” Louisiana’s Heroic 1811 Slave Revolt* (New Orleans: Cypress Press, 1996), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Tom King, “5 bedroom house at 1128 Hwy 268, In Laplace, LA 70068,” Property New Orleans, LLC, last modified June 16, 2016, <http://www.propertyneworleans.com/listings/main-and-walnut/> (accessed through the WayBack Machine Internet Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160616014846/http://www.propertyneworleans.com/listings/main-and-walnut/>).

<sup>3</sup> St. John Parish Assessor, “2020 Assessment Listing, Parcel #0400136900,” Office of St. John the Baptist Assessor, accessed April 2, 2020, <http://www.stjohnassessor.org/Details?parcelNumber=0400136900/0>.

<sup>4</sup> According to the agenda of the St. John the Baptist Parish Planning Commission in December 2019, Mr. Sheehan had requested a permit for museum tours on his property, indicating that he had in fact learned the historic importance of his property. Planning Commission Meeting agenda, December 16, 2019, St. John Parish Office of the Planning and Zoning Department, accessed April 2, 2020, <http://sjbparish.com/pdfs/Agenda%20-%2012-16-19.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> The term “slavocracy” refers to a political, economic, and social system dominated largely by (white) slaveholders. More generally, the term describes the Antebellum South’s relationship to slavery.

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that it could all end in violent and bloody revolution.<sup>6</sup> Yet, their experiment with freedom was short lived and federal troops halted the march to New Orleans. After a series of show trials, local militias executed the rebels in droves, hoping to terrify their slaves from any future resistance. Instead, Louisianan slaveholders could hardly sleep soundly. The parallels with the successful Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) did not go unnoticed and terrified the slaveholding South which feared more “large-scale insurrections on the example of St. Domingue.”<sup>7</sup> Alarmed by the possibility that such an uprising could happen again, Louisiana passed new laws that restricted the movement of slaves and free people of color, hoping to stem the revolutionary tide. Intensified by the German Coast Uprising, the fear of slave rebellion lingered in the minds of slaveholders across the South.

Yet, the current memory of the 1811 Uprising largely goes unnoticed to the casual observer of plantation majesty of the modern German Coast.<sup>8</sup> Influenced by the dismissing accounts of nineteenth century historians, the German Coast Uprising is largely absent in the volumes written about American slavery. Indeed, according to Daniel Rasmussen, one of the few historians to tackle the Uprising, historians allowed the 1811 Revolt to “[languish] in the footnotes of history for 200 years.”<sup>9</sup> As such, public knowledge about the Revolt—especially outside Louisiana—remains limited. Despite the sheer number of rebelling slaves; despite the chronological proximity to the Haitian Revolution; despite the bloody reprisals unleashed upon the rebels; despite all the post-revolutionary anxieties felt by the dominating slaver class, the German Coast Uprising remains a vastly underexplored event in the history of American slavery. I must admit I stumbled on the incident by accident, researching the history of the area of Louisiana known as the German Coast, only to discover the vast extent of this short-lived revolution.

Even in the German Coast today, the dilapidated house now owned by Mr. Sheehan is not the only site of historical erasure. Across this section of Louisiana, just a few miles outside New Orleans, public commemoration rarely extends to the sites of former plantations, or along the roads once walked by Charles Deslondes and his revolutionaries of 1811. In a larger sense, the absence of historical reference to the Uprising embodies a historical nostalgia for the Antebellum South, a view that has dominated Southern historical sites since the end of the Civil War. And yet, the Uprising does not go completely unremembered. Encouraged by a spirit of celebrating diversity and historical truth, African American activists of the twenty-first century now offer to reclaim the German Coast Uprising. For example, the establishment of the Whitney Plantation—the first historical plantation site devoted to the memory of slavery—and the November 2019 reenactment by the Slave Rebellion Reenactment (SRR) organization seek to foster historical literacy not only about the Uprising, but about slavery and racial prejudice.

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 117. It should be noted that Hunt does not refer to the German Coast Uprising by name, rather describing the event as an “incident” in St. John Parish.

<sup>8</sup> The region (just north of New Orleans in St. John the Baptist, St. Charles, and Jefferson Parishes) was named after the German immigrant population that settled the area during the French colonial period. The German minority would eventually integrate into French-Acadian society by the end of the eighteenth century. Rasmussen, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Rasmussen, 209.

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In this paper, I will explore the present state of historical and collective memory concerning the 1811 German Coast Uprising, examining sites of memory and cultural commemoration. Adapting Pierre Nora's notion of "imposed and constructed" symbols, this paper defines "sites of memory" as physical places and electronic spaces that convey institutional constructs of historical memory and identity, in this case including plantations involved in the Uprising, their websites, and nearby historical markers.<sup>10</sup> This paper finds that these sites of memory largely "impose" a historical negation of slavery by either removing reference to the Uprising or minimizing the location's involvement in the rebellion, which thus "constructs" a romantic remembrance of the antebellum South. Indeed, Lost Cause idealization – with its glorification of the pre-Civil War South – contributes greatly to "plantation romanticism," having harmful implications concerning historical depictions of racial relations.<sup>11</sup> Increasingly however, this presentation has come under scrutiny, with a cultural and political shift towards displaying historical diversity and considering the "rougher" parts of Southern history.

As such, forms of commemoration, such as public reenactment, attempt to move public discourse towards a more honest historical understanding of the nature of American slavery, including rebellions like the German Coast Uprising. Influenced by contemporary controversy over Confederate monuments, this form of commemoration reflects how non-academic sources foster historical understanding at a cultural level.<sup>12</sup> Memory of the German Coast Uprising exposes a changing public understanding of the legacy of slavery, representing a shift towards a more complete and nuanced understanding of historic injustice. As such, revisiting and reviving the memory of 1811 becomes an essential historical imperative.

### Historical Background and Historiography

The story of the German Coast Uprising extends back to the earliest introduction of slavery to Louisiana in 1710, the beginnings of a system that would last until abolition in 1865. From around 20 enslaved people in 1713, African chattel slavery quickly dominated the region, with almost 11,000 enslaved people living in the New Orleans area by 1811.<sup>13</sup> The possibility of insurrection loomed in the minds of slaveholders, even before the 1811 rebellion. Indeed, the earliest recorded act of violent slave resistance goes back to a 1726 attack on a torturer hired by

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<sup>10</sup> Pierre Nora, "Introduction," in *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past, Volume III: Symbols*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), x.

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 89. Both Eichstedt and Small discuss the definition of "romanticism" as applied to plantation museums, finding that most of the plantations they researched in Louisiana and Georgia emphasized both historical nostalgia and love. Interestingly, a cursory internet search of the term "plantation romanticism" yields links to websites for romantic getaways and marriage venues.

<sup>12</sup> Leila Fadel and Emma Bowman, "Hundreds March In Reenactment Of A Historic, But Long Forgotten Slave Rebellion," NPR, NPR, November 10, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/09/777810796/hundreds-march-in-reenactment-of-a-historic-but-long-forgotten-slave-rebellion>.

<sup>13</sup> Thrasher, 48. Comparatively, only 8,000 white people lived in New Orleans. As noted by Thrasher, the ratio between whites and blacks was higher further away from New Orleans.

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the French colonial government.<sup>14</sup> Though relatively few incidents occurred, the fear of a slave rebellion remained a constant concern for local leaders, heightened no doubt by the presence of “maroon colonies” – communities of escaped slaves surrounding the swamps of New Orleans. Indeed, in 1804, the first American governor – William C.C. Claiborne – increased the militia presence in the region, aiming to ease slaveholder fears of these communities and a general “spirit of Insurrection among the Negroes.”<sup>15</sup> Claiborne’s decision coincided with disturbing news from the French colony of Saint Domingue.

In January 1804, an army of ex-slaves under Jean-Jacques Dessalines expelled the French from Saint Domingue, established the Republic of Haiti, and abolished slavery. The news horrified the Southern slaveholders and fears of a second Haitian Revolution abounded, especially in ethnically French Louisiana, where tales of the Haitian Revolution would be passed down like “heirlooms.”<sup>16</sup> Reports of an omnipresent slave conspiracy set slaveholders on guard, who vigilantly looked for signs of revolutionary activity. Just nine years earlier, a suspected plot was thwarted after local authorities discovered revolutionary literature in a slave cabin, including the French Declaration of the Rights of Man.<sup>17</sup> Though slaveholders desperately tried to suppress news of the Haitian Revolution, the slaves learned of the conflict from unintended sources. In addition to informal contact with African American sailors, the slaves of escaped French slaveholders spread revolutionary fever among the black population of Louisiana.<sup>18</sup> Though their masters were careful to discuss news from Haiti, the newly arrived Haitian slaves shared tales of the Haitian victory whenever possible, giving the increasingly radicalized slaves a sense of “spiritual encouragement.”<sup>19</sup> Though the success of the Haitian Revolution terrified the Southern slaveholders, the Revolution became a beacon of inspiration for their slaves, “[leaving] some with the desire to emulate their brethren in the Caribbean.”<sup>20</sup> Beyond the slaveholders’ control, the seeds for revolution were planted.

In this revolutionary atmosphere, a conspiracy in the German Coast region began. Modelling themselves on the French and Haitian Revolutions, the enslaved inhabitants of Manuel Andre’s plantation had planned to stage a mass escape, secretly sending messages to plantation slaves around the area. Meeting in secret during an Epiphany celebration, three slave men from different plantations – Quamana, Harry, and Charles Deslondes – discussed tactics, adopting Kongolese guerilla tactics and organizing a military structure.<sup>21</sup> Contemporary records

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<sup>14</sup> Thrasher, 41. For historical context, Thrasher characterizes the nature of slavery in Louisiana, including description of slave punishment and torture. Therefore, it is not outside the realm of possibility to assume that the torturer in question participated in slave torture.

<sup>15</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Col. Butler, November 8, 1804, in *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne 1801-1816, Vol. III*, ed. Dunbar Rowland (Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, 1917), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew J. Calvin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 18.

<sup>17</sup> Rasmussen, 89.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Thrasher, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Hunt, 115.

<sup>21</sup> Rasmussen, 90. Rasmussen speculates that Quamana was born in the Akan kingdom in West Africa in the late 1790s. During this time, the region experienced several wars, giving rise to new African military strategies, especially among warriors from Kongo. In this environment, Quamana was sold into slavery – most likely as a prisoner of war – and brought to the United

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do not explain why the rebellion began at Woodland – the plantation where Charles was enslaved – though Rasmussen speculates that Charles’ relative autonomy as a half-white, slave driver gave him enough cover to organize his fellow slaves.<sup>22</sup>

Two days later under Deslondes, a group of twenty-five slaves rose up, killed Andre’s son Gilbert, wounded Manuel, and began searching for weapons. Leaving Woodland Plantation, the rebels were joined by other slaves from nearby plantations and maroon colonies and proceeded to march down River Road – today’s Highway 628 – towards New Orleans. Along the way, the slaves would liberate their comrades, burn down several plantations, and kill François Trépagnier, a notoriously unpopular master among the region’s slaves.<sup>23</sup> The slaves wielded machetes and guns, wore improvised uniforms, and communicated using drums and flags. Indeed, the slave’s military-like organization and discipline even impressed local slaveholders, with nineteenth-century historian Charles Gayarré begrudgingly admitting his admiration.<sup>24</sup> Chanting slogans in French, English, and native African languages, the slaves set their sights on New Orleans, aiming – as one slave would testify afterwards – to kill all white people.<sup>25</sup> A state of emergency was declared and Governor Claiborne requested federal troops under Wade Hampton to put down the rebellion. For three days, the slaves evaded capture, but local militias – organized by Manuel Andre – tracked down the slaves and, after a bloody battle, suppressed the rebel army.<sup>26</sup> The militia’s dogs viciously mauled Deslondes, tearing the revolutionary leader to shreds. The militias rounded up the rest of the slave army soon after.

Justice was swift. Though some would escape back to the maroon colonies, the rebels were divided into three groups and sent to different locations to await trial, including the plantation owned by the wealthy planter Jean Noel Destrehan. The tribunals found most of the rebelling slaves guilty and sentenced forty-five slaves to death.<sup>27</sup> Upon executing the rebels, the tribunals ordered that the dead slaves would be decapitated, their heads placed on pikes outside the Place d’Armes in New Orleans.<sup>28</sup> The message to the region’s slaves was clear: this was the price of resistance. Politically, the pushback was immediate. To solidify his power, Claiborne increased the militia presence even further and restricted rules about slave gatherings, which until then had been laxly enforced.<sup>29</sup> Slaveholders were compensated for damage to their property, both their plantations and the loss of their enslaved laborers. Though

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States. Rasmussen argues that the guerilla tactics used during the Uprising were directly influenced by Quamana and other slaves’ experiences in Africa. Rasmussen, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Rasmussen, 81,

<sup>23</sup> Rasmussen, 109.

<sup>24</sup> Thrasher, 50. Belonging to a prominent Louisiana family, Gayarré wrote several histories of the region. A vocal supporter the Confederacy, his narrative of the 1811 Revolt dismissed the rebelling slaves as a proof of slaves’ ignorance and penchant for violence. Rasmussen, 205.

<sup>25</sup> “No. 17, 2-20-11: Slave Trial,” in *The German Coast: Abstracts of the Civil Records of St. Charles and St. John the Baptist Parishes, 1804-1812*, trans. Glenn R. Conrad, (Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1981), 106.

<sup>26</sup> Rasmussen, 142.

<sup>27</sup> Ibrahima Seck, *Bouki fait Gombo: A History of the Slave Community of Habitation Haydel (Whitney Plantation) Louisiana, 1750-1860*, (New Orleans: University of New Orleans, 2014), 113.

<sup>28</sup> Rasmussen, 148.

<sup>29</sup> Rasmussen, 171-174.

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smaller acts of resistance would occur, no further slave rebellion rocked the German Coast again until the Civil War.<sup>30</sup>

Though fears of another rebellion continued to haunt Louisiana's slaveholders, the end of the Uprising merely marked the beginning of its historical obscurity. Several factors account for the limited historical discussion of the 1811 Uprising, some more major than others.<sup>31</sup> A more specific issue rests in the availability of primary sources, the lack of which has significantly affected historiographical interpretation. Beyond court documents and letters sent by Governor Claiborne, relatively few primary documents – especially contemporary firsthand accounts – remain.<sup>32</sup> Even Claiborne's biography – penned by his brother Nathaniel after William's death in 1817 – omits the reference to the Uprising.<sup>33</sup> As Claiborne's letters largely became the basis for histories about the incident, regional historians – like Charles Gayarré – uncritically accepted Claiborne's characterization of the rebels as "brigands," dismissing the event as a minor aberration in the otherwise conflict-free slave-master relation.<sup>34</sup> A broader problem rests in the romanticization of the slaveholder, as uncritical historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth century took contemporaries' idealization of the "master-slave relationship" at face value, ignoring instances of slave resistance.<sup>35</sup> Yet, while this view has been largely challenged since the latter half of the twentieth century, the 1811 Uprising still remains relatively obscure.

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<sup>30</sup> I should note that slave resistance as a concept is a complicated question for historians of American slavery. While I am referring to slave rebellions, slave resistance regularly occurred on individual plantations and could include acts like escaping, avoiding work, and breaking tools. Slave rebellions on the scale of the German Coast Uprising rarely happened in the American South, which makes the 1811 Uprising's erasure even more compelling. See John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, "The Impact of Runaway Slaves on the Slave System," in *Slavery and Emancipation*, ed. Rick Halpern, Enrico Dal Lago, and Enrico Dal Lago, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> A more technical explanation, as argued by Eugene Genovese, is since the rebellion occurred in what was considered the American frontier, the event had little impact outside Louisiana. As such, other rebellions – including those led by Nat Turner (1831) and John Brown (1859) – take a much more prominent place in the historic analysis of history. Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 43-44.

<sup>32</sup> As for the presence of newspaper accounts, Brian Gabriel contends that the local press intentionally limited its coverage, fearing the loss of the area's reputation in the domestic slave trade. Brian Gabriel, *The Press and Slavery in America, 1791-1859: The Melancholy Effect of Popular Excitement*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2016), 26, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>33</sup> Nathaniel Herbert Claiborne, *Notes on the War in the South; With Biographical Sketches of the Lives of Montgomery, Jackson, Sevier, the Late Gov. Claiborne, and Others*, (Richmond: William Ramsey Co., 1817), 109, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy1.library.arizona.edu>. Indeed, Claiborne glazes over all his brother's governorship, saying such a narrative would be "unnecessary."

<sup>34</sup> Thrasher, x. The peaceful or benevolent master-slave relationship understanding of slavery represents an older historiographical approach pushed by historians like Ulrich B. Phillips. Understandably, it has been largely refuted following the Civil Rights Movement.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Follett, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820-1860*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2005), 134.

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Beyond several journal articles, no scholarly literature has yet been written solely covering the German Coast Uprising. Outside the world of academia, the Uprising would achieve limited popular historical treatment through the works of Albert Thrasher and Daniel Rasmussen. A Marxist political activist, Thrasher's *On to New Orleans!* (1996) offered "to scientifically illuminate the revolutionary acts of the enslaved Africans," criticizing a deliberate capitalist plot to "cover up the real source of its accumulation of wealth."<sup>36</sup> Thrasher's analysis of the 1811 Rebellion relied on a variety of sources, including contemporary court documents and regional newspapers. The appendix includes a variety of documents and primary sources related to slavery in Louisiana and about the Uprising itself, though Thrasher admits that there are "lies and distortions" in these documents.<sup>37</sup> To overcome this, Thrasher would approach the subject by exploring oral tradition surrounding the Uprising and found that tales were still being told among the African American population of New Orleans.<sup>38</sup> Thrasher admits that his work is merely an "outline history" – an introduction into what sources he was able to uncover – and encourages readers to uncover the historiographical gap.<sup>39</sup> Despite his clear political intentions that limit objective understanding of the Uprising, Thrasher provides a valuable reference guide into the historical events surrounding the German Coast Uprising.

Decidedly less political and more academically inclined, Daniel Rasmussen adapted his college senior thesis on the German Coast Uprising as the basis for *American Uprising* (2011). Told in a largely narrative style, Rasmussen sought to fit the German Coast Uprising into the context of larger themes of American history, including westward expansion and the consolidation of American national identity.<sup>40</sup> Like Thrasher, Rasmussen intends his book to provoke popular engagement with the Uprising. Furthermore, Rasmussen shares Thrasher's assertion that official institutions have intentionally blocked the popular memory of the Uprising, with slaveholders and government officials creating "the most remarkable moments of historical amnesia in our national memory."<sup>41</sup> Yet, unlike Thrasher, Rasmussen seems to put more stock in the veracity of contemporary primary documents, basing his narrative largely on the testimonies told during the tribunals. Though grounded in historical research, Rasmussen's narrative also sometimes delves into the realm of dramatic speculation, particularly in terms of individual motivations. For instance, Rasmussen characterizes Charles Deslondes as someone seeking revenge, proposing that his half-white identity was the primary factor for his part in the rebellion, with the implication that his owner raped his mother.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps a commentary on the lack of primary documents from the slaves, Rasmussen's almost dramatic presentation seems to rely on literary archetypes and runs the risk of being dangerously close to historical fiction. Nevertheless, Rasmussen's extensive secondary source research into the nature of Southern slavery largely overcomes that potential pitfall. As such, *American Uprising* represents another important overview of the 1811 Uprising.

Though both Thrasher and Rasmussen's works are well researched, several factors limit their effectiveness as pieces of popular history. Perhaps due to its political conclusions, Thrasher's book is not as accessible as other pieces of popular history. Furthermore, availability

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<sup>36</sup> Thrasher, ix.

<sup>37</sup> Thrasher, ix.

<sup>38</sup> Thrasher, xi.

<sup>39</sup> Thrasher, xi.

<sup>40</sup> Rasmussen, 210.

<sup>41</sup> Rasmussen, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Rasmussen, 85.

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of Thrasher's work is limited, as the book was self-published and is no longer in print. I was only able to get a copy by going directly to the Hidden History Tours website, a Louisianan group that Thrasher was involved with during his life.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Rasmussen's work – though accessibly told in a narrative style – does not offer new information not already discussed by Thrasher. Though both books attempt to spur public interest in the German Coast Uprising, they remain, at their core, works of popular history, designed to be sold rather than to educate. As such, other sources of historical memory become necessary to preserve the legacy of the 1811 Rebellion.

### Sites of Memory

Given the lack of serious academic research and the limited scope of works of public history, the memory of the German Coast Uprising relies on the condition of public, physical sites of memory. And yet, historical memorials of places involved in the Uprising – either in the form of plantations or historical markers – have largely erased reference to the Rebellion. Physically, most plantations once involved in the Uprising are either not readily open to the public – as is the case with Andre's plantation at Woodland – or no longer exist, with most of the land now owned by petroleum refineries.<sup>44</sup> Indeed only one historical marker – just outside the Woodland Plantation in St. John the Baptist Parish – references the planning German Coast Uprising.<sup>45</sup> Though the rebellion extended into St. Charles and Jefferson Parishes, the singular reference to the rebellion rests in this one sign. Moreover, as noted by James Loewen, the sign was not even commissioned by the local government and was raised using "private funds."<sup>46</sup> More generally, the existence of slavery in the region remains unmarked, much less the largest slave rebellion in American history.

In the German Coast, the memory of slavery largely rests in the few remaining former plantation sites, some of which are open to the public. Yet, as explored by Alex Lichtenstein, the marking of a site does not free it from "national, ethnic, or community interpretive interests of the moment."<sup>47</sup> The sites that do remain largely offer erasure by omission and expose a historical disparity in portraying not only the 1811 Uprising, but slavery itself. However, a recent trend has pushed for greater historical accuracy at these sights, challenging "plantation ideology," the romantic imagination of slavery. To explore developments in the German Coast region, I have chosen three plantation sites that are still open to the public and played a role in the events of the 1811 Rebellion: the Ormond, Destrehan, and Whitney Plantations.

The role of the plantation as a site of memory has been a source of discussion for historians since the end of slavery and destruction of the Confederacy after the Civil War.

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<sup>43</sup> I will reference Hidden History Tours later in the paper.

<sup>44</sup> Thrasher, 52-53. As explored by Jessica Rapson, regional urban development reveals a contemporary class and racial disparity at plantation sites outside New Orleans. This disparity is reflected at plantation sites, which Rapson contends largely "elide the reality of slave sugar production." Jessica K. Rapson, "Refining Memory: Sugar, Oil and Plantation Tourism on Louisiana's River Road," *Memory Studies*, (2018), doi:[10.1177/1750698018766384](https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698018766384).

<sup>45</sup> "Woodland Plantation," The Historical Marker Database, last revised February 2, 2020, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=85243>.

<sup>46</sup> James Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*, (New York: The New Press, 2019), 206.

<sup>47</sup> Alex Lichtenstein, "Introduction" in *Marked, Unmarked, Remembered: A Geography of American Memory*, (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2017), 15.



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According to Jessica Adams, the post-Civil War plantations served as “theatres of memory,” ones which appealed to a romantic view of the South as a region of distinct white “eccentricity.”<sup>48</sup> As such, the plantation became a source of regional pride, representing a time before the South’s costly defeat and the blurring of the racial hierarchy following abolition. As explored by Eichstedt and Small, Louisianan plantations especially frame their prominence in Antebellum Southern society, presenting themselves as cultural artifacts of a lost “grand romantic and luxurious” society.<sup>49</sup> Rather than focusing on the plantation’s function as a site of capitalist production, the plantation became mythologized with tales of white chivalry and white honor, concepts that helped separate Southern identity from increasingly homogenized American nationalism.<sup>50</sup> The plantation as a cultural body seeped into Southern understandings of history, one that was expressed culturally through films and books like *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*.<sup>51</sup> In the minds of white Southerners who longed for the stability and glory of the Antebellum South, the plantation represented a source of historical stability, a fixed representation of historical legacy. With this narrative of stability, the plantation became representative of pride in a white, Southern heritage.<sup>52</sup> Yet, slavery – with all of its noticeable brutality – largely did not fit this vision of the “genteel” South, thus beginning a trend of historical censorship.<sup>53</sup> The censorship of slavery – which contrasted with a romantic vision of the South – played into the development of Lost Cause ideology, that the Civil War was a heroically unnecessary conflict that destroyed the Antebellum “racial utopia.”<sup>54</sup> While most plantations no longer explicitly deny their site’s role as a place of enslavement, the erasure of slavery’s memory – along with memory of slave resistance – persists.

The internet presence of plantation sites also relates to plantation ideology, particularly considering the modern plantation’s role as a tourist attraction. The plantation website becomes a sales pitch to prospective visitors, showcasing what experiences the plantation seeks to deliver, as plantation websites represent for most visitors the first impression they may receive

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<sup>48</sup> Jessica Adams, *The Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 56-57.

<sup>49</sup> Eichstedt and Small, 57.

<sup>50</sup>In her article on plantation memory, Aisha Khan notes that from its origins as a term to describe large-scale agriculture, the term “plantation” became a “paradoxical metaphor for power, exploitation, order, and progress.” By the late twentieth century, the “factory” image of the plantation – along with the Civil Rights Movement – reinforced the dehumanizing, “repetitive and depersonalized” nature of the plantation as a site of enslavement. Aisha Khan, “Amid Memory and Historical Consciousness: Locating the Plantation Past,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 23, No. 1 (2010): pg. 171.

<sup>51</sup> Adams, 73.

<sup>52</sup> Antoinette T. Jackson, *Speaking for the Enslaved: Heritage Interpretation at Antebellum Plantation Sites*, (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2012), 22-23.

<sup>53</sup> Eichstedt and Small, 105.

<sup>54</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hall, “Granite Stopped in Time: Stone Mountain Memorial and the Representation of White Southern Identity,” in *Monuments to the Lost Cause*, eds. Cynthia Mills and Pamela H. Simpson, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 229. Hall discusses the “authentic plantation” built in 1963 at the Stone Mountain Memorial just outside Atlanta. Sold as a replica of Tara from *Gone with the Wind*, the simulated plantation represented the idealization of the Antebellum plantation.

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of a plantation.<sup>55</sup> Plantation websites therefore have a commercial interest in presenting their interpretation of plantation history. As explored by Candace Forbes Bright and David L. Butler, the internet presence of plantations has reflected an increased representation of slavery.<sup>56</sup> Given the relative ease of changing information online, examination of the websites relates to how historic plantation institutions respond to changing cultural attitudes about historical diversity. As such, my analyses of the Ormond, Destrehan, and Whitney Plantation include an examination of their online presence, underscoring the plantation's function in the tourist industry.

The Ormond Plantation, located around twenty miles outside of New Orleans, represents an explicit example of "plantation romanticism." Today a part bed-and-breakfast, the charming Ormond estate hosts wedding ceremonies and receptions, catering to any couple's needs. The venue is not for the light of cash: for a ceremony in front of the distinctive mansion's entrance, one can expect to pay up to \$1,200. For a wedding reception of 80-124 guests, "The Plantation Package" charges \$82 per person, offering four main course selections and a "Honeymoon Night" in the bridal suite.<sup>57</sup> The website boasts a portfolio of past weddings: blushing brides and bridesmaids pose under the shade of moss-covered oak trees; groomsmen stand proudly in front of what appears to be a depilated river boat; extended families – most of them white families – smile together on a carefully manicured lawn in front of the massive "Louisiana Colonial" style mansion.<sup>58</sup> Looking at these happy faces, it is uncertain who among them read the venue's "About" section of the plantation's website. If they had, they would have read that the plantation was built in the late eighteenth-century under the direction of Pierre Trépagnier, a member of the upper crust of French Creole society and relative to the murdered Francois Trépagnier. They would have known that after Pierre's death, Colonel Richard Butler, an Irish immigrant, bought the land and renamed the plantation "after his ancestral home, the Castle Ormonde in Ireland." Perhaps they would have been able to recall the many families who had bought and then sold the estate following the folksily named "War Between the States."<sup>59</sup> Yet, they would have failed to see any mention that this plantation – now the beautiful venue of so many happy marriages – was once a site of enslavement. Nor would they see that on January 9, 1811 a massive slave army laid siege to Ormond, offering the enslaved inhabitants a chance at freedom.<sup>60</sup> The cheers now shouted and tears now shed on the Ormond dance floor

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<sup>55</sup> Candace Forbes Bright and David L. Butler. "Webwashing the Tourism Plantation: Using Historic Websites to View Changes in the Representation of Slavery at Tourism Plantations." In *Social Memory and Heritage Tourism Methodologies*, eds. Stephen P. Hanna, Amy E. Potter, E. Arnold Modlin, Jr., Perry Carter, and David L. Butler, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 31.

<sup>56</sup> Bright and Butler, 45.

<sup>57</sup> "Wedding Packages," Ormond Plantation, Ormond Plantation House, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://www.plantation.com/>.

<sup>58</sup> "Portfolio," Ormond Plantation.

<sup>59</sup> "Ormond's History," Ormond Plantation. The term "War Between the States" itself is a Lost Cause product, as it implies that the Civil War was primarily fought over issues of state sovereignty. As such, the alternate name carries significant racial implications, as it downplays the role of slavery in starting the conflict. James Loewen, "Introduction: Unknown, Well-Known Documents," in *The Confederate and Neo-Confederate: The "Great Truth" and the "Lost Cause,"* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 25.

<sup>60</sup> Thrasher, 53.

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cannot compare to the cheers then shouted and tears then shed by people who yearned their freedom, who joyously joined an army of liberation.

The “romantic” erasure at Ormond Plantation is not unique to the location and is comparable to other former sites of enslavement. As explored by Eichstedt and Small, sites like Ormond largely “focus on themes of romance and relaxation,” selling their visitors an experience of luxury living by having visitors forget the historic presence of slavery.<sup>61</sup> The “elegant reality” offered as “wedding packages” on the Ormond website almost asks visitors to imagine themselves as members of the genteel, Antebellum class.<sup>62</sup> The internet presence of Ormond heightens this illusion, with photos that display symbols of the romantic South: rows of moss-draped tress, the distinct second-story porch propped up by classical columns, the gravel driveway complete with a carriage, etc.<sup>63</sup> The suggestion of luxury at Ormond fits the model of what Eichstedt and Small call “symbolic annihilation,” the purposeful denial of slavery’s presence at a former site of enslavement.<sup>64</sup> The knowledge that Ormond once enslaved African Americans or that the site played a role in the German Coast Uprising become secondary to the experience of the plantation as a site of beauty. Understandably, as the site mainly caters to wedding customers, Ormond does not seek to dwell on historic injustices. However, the erasure of slavery and the 1811 Rebellion contribute to a larger historic perception that minimizes the role of slavery on the plantation, favoring an image that depicts the life of privileged slaveholders.

In contrast to Ormond, the Destrehan Plantation recognizes its role as a historic habitation, selling itself as a slice of Louisiana’s history. Indeed, the front-page of its website invites visitors to travel through the state’s history, promising to immerse you “in the rich history of Louisiana, when French was the language and the white gold of sugar drove the economy.”<sup>65</sup> A slideshow displays the picturesque estate, with smiling staff members dressed in period costumes, waiting to show you around the place. The plantation boasts itself as the home of the prominent Destrehan family, descendants of the earliest French settlers who would play an important role in the development of Louisiana.<sup>66</sup> A family overview tells the stories of prominent Destrehan men, like Jean Noel – the man who lent his plantation for the Uprising’s tribunals. Unlike Ormond, Destrehan does not seem to shy away from mentioning the plantation’s role as a site of enslavement. Indeed, the plantation’s website devotes at least three sections of its “History” page to the presence of enslaved people and includes several links to registries of the enslaved who lived on the plantation.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, the plantation offers what it calls the “Unheard Voices Tour,” an interactive experience started in 2012 that seeks to include stories of “marginalized people,” including poor “German farmers, Acadians, enslaved African Americans, and native Americans.”<sup>68</sup> Most notably, the plantation seems to recognize

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<sup>61</sup> Eichstedt and Small, 91.

<sup>62</sup> “Wedding Packages.”

<sup>63</sup> “Portfolio.”

<sup>64</sup> Eichstedt and Small, 10. Ormond Plantation was one of the plantations visited by Eichstedt and Small, who categorized the site as an example of symbolic annihilation. Eichstedt and Small, 273.

<sup>65</sup> “Front Page for Destrehan Plantation,” Destrehan Plantation, River Road Historical Society, last modified April 3, 2020, <https://www.destrehanplantation.org/>.

<sup>66</sup> “Our History,” Destrehan Plantation.

<sup>67</sup> “Our History.”

<sup>68</sup> “Unheard Voices Tour,” Destrehan Plantation.

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its role as one of the sites of the post-revolutionary tribunals. An entire section of the museum—in what were once slave cabins—is dedicated to displaying the legacy of the German Coast Uprising. On its surface, the Destrehan Plantation understands its legacy as a site of enslavement, creating a public sphere that commemorates and educates its visitors about historic cruelty.

And yet, Destrehan is still largely limited in its analysis of slavery, with perhaps more room to grow. Though the site has improved since its establishment as a museum in 1971, slavery appears to take second chair to such features as the beauty of the plantation's architecture and the prominence of the white family that once lived there. For instance, though one of the History pages notes that the house was built using slave labor, the page primarily describes the architectural result, emphasizing the stately "balustrade gallery" and praising the craftsmanship of Charles Paquet, the enslaved master builder.<sup>69</sup> As of March 2020, it appears that this representation is still an improvement since Eichstedt and Small's visit in the early 2000s. Eichstedt and Small describe an introductory video before their tour, in which a female narrator erroneously notes that Charles—described as a "free mulatto"—was commissioned to build the house.<sup>70</sup> Though present, the exhibition of the 1811 Uprising is also limited. Daniel Rasmussen recounts visiting Destrehan during the writing of his thesis in 2009, noting that the 1811 exhibit was not available on the main tour and only briefly describes such a groundbreaking and revolutionary moment. Indeed, Rasmussen cynically notes that the plantation's representation of slavery mirrors a larger historical narrative that "compartmentalizes" the history of slavery "away from the central narrative of American history" (i.e. white people).<sup>71</sup> Destrehan's role as a place of violence particularly drives the disconnect between its tourist attraction status and its role as a purveyor of historical truth. The historical minimizing at Destrehan—what Eichstedt and Small call "trivialization"—still "leaves intact" imagery of "noble slaves" like Charles Paquet, even though Destrehan depicts the presence of slavery.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, a discussion of the historic role of slavery as an instrument of state and racial oppression goes largely unnoticed at Destrehan. As such, Destrehan becomes an unintentional site of tragedy, participating in the visual commodification of historical disaster without displaying the full context of the site's importance.<sup>73</sup> To Adams, sites like Destrehan that "[express] a desire for more 'authentic' representation of plantation life," do so selectively, carefully balancing authenticity with marketability.<sup>74</sup> Destrehan's representation of slavery—while certainly present—participates in the erasure of slavery by failing to deliver the entire historical context of slavery.

The third plantation is an entirely different story. The Whitney Plantation Museum, established in 2015, reminds visitors of its unique status as "the only plantation museum [...] with an exclusive focus on slavery."<sup>75</sup> The owner's house—or the "Big House" as the slaves

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<sup>69</sup> "The Building of a Plantation," Destrehan Plantation.

<sup>70</sup> Eichstedt and Small, 210.

<sup>71</sup> Rasmussen, 200-201.

<sup>72</sup> Eichstedt and Small, 210.

<sup>73</sup> Emily Godbey, "Making Memories: Tragic Tourism's Visual Traces," in *Rhetoric, Remembrance, and Visual Form: Sighting Memory*, ed. Anne Teresa Demo and Bradford Vivian, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 235.

<sup>74</sup> Adams, 65.

<sup>75</sup> "Whitney Plantation," Whitney Plantation, Whitney Plantation Organization, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.whitneyplantation.org/>.

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knew it—is not the primary focus on the museum, unlike at Ormond and Destrehan. Rather, the museum seeks to emphasize the plantation as a site of enslavement. Indeed, the sprawling estate—with its remarkably well-preserved work areas—compels visitors to reckon with the purpose of a plantation: to make money by brutally exploiting its workforce. Along with the original structures once inhabited by the slaves, the museum includes several memorials to the thousands of people once enslaved in the state of Louisiana. Furthermore, the omnipresent life-like child statues dotting the plantation site reminds visitors that even the children of slaves were not spared from the horrors of enslavement and white supremacy.<sup>76</sup> Though the site did not witness the main events of the German Coast Uprising, the museum’s representation of the Revolt intentionally contrasts with the other nearby historic plantations along River Road, reminding visitors of the brutality of slavery. Commemorative art by Woodward Nash compels visitors to bear witness to the bloody struggle for freedom. On steel rods, the ceramic heads of sixty-three African Americans—all representing the executed revolutionaries of 1811—lifelessly hang their mouths open.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, the museum explains the history of slave resistance, noting that while armed insurrection was the most visible form, more passive resistance occurred daily.<sup>78</sup> The plantation’s website offers educational resources for educators, promoting both academic sources and works of more accessible popular history.<sup>79</sup> In embracing the role of the museum as a place of education, the Whitney Plantation seeks to widen a cultural and historic discussion about the role of slavery in American history.

What makes the Whitney Plantation a compelling site of historical memory is its frank engagement with historical injustice. Indeed, the mission of the Whitney Plantation to educate the public on the nature of American slavery represents the continuation of a political demand for the institutional recognition of the injustices of slavery, with black activists largely taking it upon themselves to create such a change.<sup>80</sup> In its dedication to the memory of slavery, the Whitney plantation subverts the traditional role of the plantation as a site of white heritage, rather promoting the plantation as a symbol of African American heritage.<sup>81</sup> This alternative presentation challenges monolithic categorizations of American slavery, giving way to historical nuance.<sup>82</sup> Visitors must reckon with the site’s role as a place of enslavement, which fostered the development of the American nation. Furthermore, the inclusion of information about the German Coast Uprising challenges historic erasure, presenting African Americans as active agents in the history of American slavery. The Whitney plantation seeks to empower

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<sup>76</sup> “Children of the Whitney Plantation,” Whitney Plantation.

<sup>77</sup> Contributors from Whitney Plantation, “1811 Slave Revolt Memorial,” Slavery and Remembrance, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, accessed April 29, 2020, <http://slaveryandremembrance.org/>.

<sup>78</sup> “Resistance,” Whitney Plantation.

<sup>79</sup> “Resources,” Whitney Plantation.

<sup>80</sup> Ana Lucia Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Transnational and Comparative History*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 177.

<sup>81</sup> Antoinette Jackson explores a similar situation at the Friendfield Plantation, which made national headlines as the plantation where First Lady Michelle Obama’s ancestors were enslaved. Jackson argues that the event and the plantation elevated public discourse about the role of the plantation in American history, arguing that Friendfield and sites like it can “tell a bigger, more critically engaging story” about African American history. Jackson, 65-66.

<sup>82</sup> Jackson, 136.

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historically marginalized communities, a challenge to the predominance of symbols of white supremacy and Lost Cause idealization.

### Commemoration and Reenactment

Though the efforts of the Whitney Plantation forcefully challenge historical erasure at an institutional and educational level, public commemoration, primarily through reenactment, seeks to place the 1811 Uprising directly in the public eye. Though not the first form of public commemoration concerning the 1811 Uprising, the Slave Rebellion Reenactment's (SRR) 2019 production represents how reenactment can engage audiences in historical memory. According to the project's designer Dread Scott, the reenactment encourages audiences to consider "who the real heroes [of the nineteenth century] were," hoping to inspire public and historical interest in the German Coast Uprising.<sup>83</sup> As such, by entering the public space, the SRR's reenactment seeks to transmit historical knowledge in commemorating the 1811 Uprising and ensuring that the Revolt is not forgotten. Furthermore, the SRR challenges Lost Cause romanticism about slavery, an idea which largely ignores and erases the image of the slave as historical actors and active participant in the struggle for abolition.

Though memory of the Uprising persisted along the German Coast among the descendants of the region's slaves, no public celebration has been documented before the end of the twentieth century. The earliest public commemoration for the Uprising occurred in 1995 with a parade through the New Orleans suburb of Norco, organized by the African American History Alliance of Louisiana (AAHAL).<sup>84</sup> Though the parade would be repeated in 1996, the tradition was not to last, as the AAHAL dissolved in the early 2000s. The leaders of the AAHAL – including local historian Leon A. Waters – would organize the remains of the AAHAL into the Louisiana Museum of African American History (LMAAH).<sup>85</sup> Yet, the LMAAH would not continue the parade tradition, compelling Waters to establish Hidden History Tours, a touring company that focuses on the forgotten history of African Americans in the New Orleans area. Most notably, Waters guides two walking and bus tours of the New Orleans area solely showcasing the 1811 Uprising, promising that visitors will see "history [...] come alive."<sup>86</sup> Much like the Whitney Plantation, Waters' tour company compels visitors to witness the sites of memory, providing historical background. Yet, besides Waters' guided tours, few local organizations have successfully pushed for commemoration in the public sphere, and the narratives created at sites like Ormond and Destrehan could dominate the institutional memory of the Uprising.

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<sup>83</sup> Richard Fausset, "With a Slave Rebellion Reenactment, an Artist Revives Forgotten History," *New York Times*, November 9, 2019, last modified November 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

<sup>84</sup> Thrasher, iv.

<sup>85</sup> As of 2012, LAAMH spearheaded historical preservation projects in the New Orleans area, including efforts to commemorate a historic African American cemetery that was destroyed to create the Bonnet Carré Spillway. It is unclear if the organization still operates. Daniel McDowell, "Sacred Ground: Unearthing Buried History at the Bonnet Carré Spillway," *Antigravity Magazine*, May 2019, <http://antigravitymagazine.com/feature/sacred-ground-unearthing-buried-history-at-the-bonnet-carre-spillway/>.

<sup>86</sup> "1811 Slave Revolt Bus Tour," Hidden History Tours, accessed April 20, 2020. <https://www.hiddenhistory.us>. The website's store is where I purchased *On to New Orleans!* and is still the only place to buy Thrasher's book.

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Owing to the lack of historic representation, the SRR sought to revive the German Coast Uprising. The origins of the SRR go back to 2012, when Dread Scott – a New York-based preformist artist – produced and performed *Dread Scott: A Decision* at the Brooklyn Academy. At times a surrealist performance, the play starred Dread Scott, who read the infamous ruling from *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, the 1857 case that would legally define American citizenship solely belonging to white men.<sup>87</sup> Scott's interest in slavery's role in the formation of American identity drove him to write the play, an interest that would be repeated in the SRR.<sup>88</sup> Scott, an ironic stage name, has not said much publicly about why he orchestrated the project beyond his artistic statement to create "revolutionary art to propel history forward" and promote discussion of historical controversy in the United States.<sup>89</sup> Yet, his performance came at a relevant time in New Orleans news.

In 2015, controversy erupted after New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu decided to remove several statues honoring Confederate leaders, including President Jefferson Davis and General P.G.T. Beauregard. According to Mayor Landrieu, the statues represented a lingering monument to the institutional praise of the slaveholding South, what he called the "Cult of the Lost Cause."<sup>90</sup> The controversy divided the city, with violence and threats of violence breaking out around the statue of Robert E. Lee.<sup>91</sup> However, the white supremacist shooting in 2015 at the Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston compelled the city of New Orleans to remove all monuments related to the Confederacy and the Lost Cause.<sup>92</sup> The controversy that surrounded the city of New Orleans over the presence of Confederate monuments becomes a microcosm of a larger debate about the role of commemorating historical tragedies committed in the name of ruling and dominating institutions.

In this battleground about the nature of historical memory, the SRR attempted to process complex historical attitudes about the legacy of slavery and white supremacy, transporting that issue to the present day and compelling white audiences to reckon with forgotten histories. Consulting local historians and artists to produce the reenactment, Scott organized a two-day march, which would retrace the route taken by the slaves.<sup>93</sup> Though Scott consulted several works, it appears Thrasher's *On to New Orleans* particularly inspired him, as seen in an interview between the artist and Michael Slate, host of the radio show for the

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<sup>87</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions," Slave Rebellion Reenactment, 2019, accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.slave-revolt.com/>.

<sup>88</sup> "FAQ," Slave Rebellion Reenactment.

<sup>89</sup> Dread Scott, "Artists Statement," Dread Scott, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.dreadscott.net/>.

<sup>90</sup> Mayor's Office, "City Of New Orleans Begins Removal of Divisive Confederate Statues Commemorating 'Cult Of The Lost Cause,'" City of New Orleans, April 24, 2017, <https://www.nola.gov/mayor/news/archive/2017/042417-pr-city-of-new-orleans-begins-removal-of-di/>.

<sup>91</sup> Tegan Wendland, "With Lee's Statue's Removal, Another Battle of New Orleans Comes to a Close," NPR, NPR, May 20, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/20/529232823/with-lee-statues-removal-another-battle-of-new-orleans-comes-to-a-close>.

<sup>92</sup> Maya Rhodan, "New Orleans Mayor Asks City to Remove Confederate Statues," Time, July 9, 2015, <https://time.com/3952177/new-orleans-confederate-statues/>.

<sup>93</sup> "FAQ."

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American Revolutionary Communist Party.<sup>94</sup> The participants – mostly local actors – donned period clothing, carried farm tools and muskets, waved flags modeled after those used in the Haitian Revolution, and chanted slogans that would have been used by the rebelling slaves.<sup>95</sup> The actors were largely of African American descent – as the reenactment required all actors to be of African American descent – with some being descendent from slaves that lived in the region.<sup>96</sup> Though the performance would receive national attention, the reenactment was not extensively publicized before, adding an element of secrecy and surprise to capture the shock that the slaveholders would have felt. Indeed, locals were evidently surprised, with locals angrily remarking that the demonstration would back up traffic and questioning the need for such a performance.<sup>97</sup> As a means of raising historical consciousness about the German Coast Uprising and the nature of resistance to American slavery, the SRR represents a form of cultural commemoration, directly engaging audience members to the historical argument.

In general, historical reenactment is essential to the creation of historical memory. In reenactment – as with any form of dramatic production – the audience represents an important part of the historical message. Indeed, as argued by Colin Counsel, in having audiences bear witness to simulated historical events, reenactment serves as a “constructive medium,” where simulated historical events “give form” to new historical memories.<sup>98</sup> The notion of authenticity supports this effect of creating historical memory, as reenactment – particularly with convincing features like period dress or props – plays into audience familiarity. As argued by Catherine Hughes, the audience of any reenactment “sees double,” meaning that they see individual reenactors as both the historic figures and the modern people who portrays them.<sup>99</sup> Audience members are intended to relate to the reenactors at an intimate level, forming identifiable bonds that emerge as interpretations of the situations they witnessed.<sup>100</sup> As such, the reenactment becomes an experience of education history, which then plays into how individuals interpret historical events and themes. The interpretation of the reenactment by the reenactors, either as a support or challenge to official historical narratives, becomes an important distinction in how historical memory is influenced. As an artistic form of conveying a message, “historical theatre” forces audiences to engage in “cultural/ethnic, national, or even transnational” debates about

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<sup>94</sup> Dread Scott, “Hundreds Trace the Path of the 1811 Slave Rebellion in Louisiana,” interview by Michael Slate, *The Michael Slate Show*, November 11, 2019,

<https://revcom.us/a/621/michael-slate-interviews-dread-scott-en.html>

<sup>95</sup> “SRR Costume Department,” *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*.

<sup>96</sup> “FAQ;” A white actor did play the role of Manuel Andre. Oliver Laughland, “‘It makes it real:’ Hundreds March to Re-Enact 1811 Louisiana Slave Rebellion,” *Guardian*, Guardian News and Media Limited, November 11, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/11/louisiana-slave-rebellion-reenactment-artist-dread-scott>.

<sup>97</sup> Laughland.

<sup>98</sup> Colin Counsel, “Introduction,” in *Performance, Embodiment, and Cultural Memory*, ed. Colin Counsel and Roberta Mock, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 8.

<sup>99</sup> Catherine Hughes, “‘Is That Real?:’ An Exploration of What is Real in a Performance Based on History,” in *Enacting History*, ed. Scot Magelssen and Rhona Justice-Malloy, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 136.

<sup>100</sup> Hughes, 138.



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the past.<sup>101</sup> Thus, reenactment becomes both art and education, conveying a historical understanding through the familiar means of the actor-audience relationship.

The relationship between reenactment studies and slavery represents a rich historical and artistic tradition, particularly in the context of forcibly engaging the public with questions of historical memory. However, the reenactment of slavery often serves to support historical interpretations that focus primarily on the historic role of white people, minimizing racial and class conflict that characterizes history. At former plantations like Destrehan and other historic sites like Colonial Williamsburg, the reenactment of slavery is represented through living history, with African American actors portraying the lives of enslaved people.<sup>102</sup> However, slave reenactors often simply fulfill the authenticity role required to deliver a historic experience. For instance, as seen at Colonial Williamsburg, historical authenticity is established by creating an environment that clearly represents a departure from the modern world, with dirt roads and horse-drawn coaches. As argued by Lisa Woolfork, the presence of slaves accomplishes the same task, one which further serves to objectify the historic slave as mere tool to deliver an authentic experience.<sup>103</sup> Additionally, the representation of slavery carries implications about the dichotomy between the white and black reenactors: whereas the white reenactor is free to imagine the nostalgia of history, African American reenactors of slavery are forced to remember the historical legacy of racial oppression.<sup>104</sup> Based on the concept of “dual seeing,” the representation of slavery through reenactment can potentially present a false interpretation of history. Indeed, the prevalence of submissive slave characters in popular culture – like Prissy or Mammy from *Gone with the Wind* – indicates the potentially harmful effect of misrepresenting live depictions of slavery, as it could create false understandings of the nature of slavery.<sup>105</sup> Reenactment then becomes a power tool of fostering historic truth and fiction.

The SRR largely serves to dispel ideas that indicate the passivity of slaves, while also utilizing reenactment as a means of encouraging historical memory. In portraying the rebel slaves, the SRR gives agency to the slaves as historic figures, challenging the notion that American slaves simply refused to challenge their enslavement.<sup>106</sup> The simulated violence in the reenactment subverts the traditional spectacle of racially motivated violence, mirroring the spectacle of lynching.<sup>107</sup> Scott himself noted that historical reenactment has tended to be dominated by white participants, calling into question as to what institutions create historical

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<sup>101</sup> Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>102</sup> “Unheard Voices Tour.”

<sup>103</sup> Lisa Woolfork, *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 160.

<sup>104</sup> Woolfork, 163.

<sup>105</sup> Ana Lucia Araujo, *Shadows of the Slave Past: Memory, Heritage, and Slavery*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 182.

<sup>106</sup> Laughland.

<sup>107</sup> The spectacle of lynching, as explored by Ken Gonzales Day, represents a complex analysis into the American romanticism of mob justice, an idea that largely fits into Anglo-centric interpretations of American history. Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West: 1850-1935*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 91.

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narratives.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, the production seeks to open national conversations of race, history, and American identity. With the SRR, the depiction of slaves is both educational and performative. Though the actors dress in contemporary clothes, they are not there to educate in the living history sense. Rather, their costumes are not just symbols of authenticity, but also symbolic representation of the legacy of slavery. The performers of 2019 are not demanding the same things as the rebels of 1811. Rather they represent a present demand to be heard, that the challenges facing the African American community are the legacy of a historic system aimed to keep them oppressed. Several of the actors involved in the project cite sociopolitical issues with race as the reason they volunteered for the project, for instance the issue of police brutality.<sup>109</sup> In playing with the effect of historical reenactment, the SRR fosters the memory of the 1811 Uprising, while also connecting issues of racial injustice to the legacy of slavery.

### Conclusions

In his work *The Burden of Southern History*, historian C. Vann Woodward struggles to define Southern identity, one which Woodward argues is more deeply entrenched in historical memory than the rest of the United States. The legacy and loss of the Civil War looms in the Southern consciousness, for it is a defeated land in a country that has always sought to declare victory. Indeed, Woodward contends that Southern history is not the same as American history, arguing instead that “Southern history [...] includes large components of frustration, failure, and defeat.”<sup>110</sup> Unintentionally, Woodward revealed a great truth about the history of remembering slavery and slave resistance. Woodward had encapsulated the sad historic truth of German Coast Uprising: a history of frustration, failure, and defeat. For much of the period following the defeat of Charles Deslondes and his crew, the memory of the 1811 Rebellion went unnoticed, drowned out by the prejudices of historians who merely saw the revolutionaries as criminal insurgents. Even as the country progressed to include people of color into the American narrative, the German Coast Uprising remained hidden to a mass audience. The romantic idealization of the Antebellum South at plantation monuments did nothing to communicate the importance of the 1811 Rebellion. The erasure of slave rebellions at sites of memory – whether by intentional destruction or omission – represented a serious challenge towards public understanding of slavery’s legacy by removing symbols of constant historical remembrance.

However, thanks the actions of popular historians like Thrasher and Rasmussen, as well as activists like Dread Scott, the story of the German Coast Uprising is being transformed into a tale of victory, a glorious representation of the long struggle for freedom. The efforts to revive the memory of the 1811 Rebellion – including changes at the Destrehan Plantation, the Whitney Plantation’s laser focus on the experience of enslaved people, and the performance art of the SRR – seek to elevate the 1811 Uprising from historical obscurity. The importance of remembering the German Coast Uprising rests in its challenge to misconceptions about the history of slavery, including the supposed myth of slave passivity and the idea of the benevolent master. Furthermore, the revived remembrance of the German Coast Uprising raises questions about who controls the narrative of Southern history. The historical, cultural, and

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<sup>108</sup> Laughland. The seminal work regarding reenactment culture in the United States, especially relating to Civil War memory, is Tony Horwitz’s *Confederates in the Attic*.

<sup>109</sup> Laughland.

<sup>110</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 19.

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political debate over the legacy of slavery clashes with the reverence lavished on the supposed heroes of the Confederacy and the Antebellum South. The world of sites like Ormond, with its aristocratic mythology, is being challenged. The developments at the Destrehan plantation demonstrate the lengths still required to go to establish a nuanced presentation of the history of slavery. The success of the Whitney Plantation in conveying the historical agency of African Americans represents a model upon which other sites can develop their own exhibits about slavery. The SRR also represents a push at a cultural level to raise awareness about the persistence of historical injustice facing the African American community, questioning the dominance of a narrative that largely excludes minorities.

The memory of the German Coast Uprising represents a wider problem with historical memory in the United States: the simple question of whose it is? In a country of so many ethnicities and cultures, there cannot be one American narrative. And yet, in schools and textbooks, there is an official narrative, one that promotes a vision of American conformity and unity. In the conclusion of his book about the German Coast Uprising, Daniel Rasmussen contends that the rebellion was very much an American one, one that represents the difficulties faced by marginalized communities to this day. The right to expect more and to demand better is central to the German Coast Uprising, and to a vision of the United States that achieves those goals of equality and justice. However, the political reality of Thrasher's work holds true: American institutions have been designed to hold people back, to languish in defeat. It is in studying and promoting the history of the German Coast Uprising that we come a more nuanced history of injustice, seeing what failed to advance the goals of oppressed people and how it could succeed in the future. It is in the vision of artists like Scott, of people who understand history, that we can begin to challenge unjust systems. The history of the German Coast Uprising is essential to the cultural understanding of slavery. In studying both it and its erasure, we come to see the nature of American institutions, while also understanding where the American spirit for revolution comes from.

In short, the memory of the slaveholder has dominated the memory of slavery. In uncovering the stories of resistance and individuality, we challenge that view and open discussion as to how American history is not and cannot be limited to one group of people. As Thrasher reminds us, "until the lion writes his own story, the story of the hunt will always tell the story of the hunter."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Thrasher, ix.

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