

# Why I withdrew my proposed slave memorial at Faneuil Hall

By Steve Locke , August 4, 2019

I am the artist who proposed and recently withdrew a design for a memorial artwork at Faneuil Hall that acknowledges the connection between Peter Faneuil, his family, and the trafficking of Africans and African-Americans in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

That work, titled “Auction Block Memorial at Faneuil Hall: A Site Dedicated to Those Enslaved Africans and African-Americans Whose Kidnapping and Sale Here Took Place and Whose Labor and Trafficking Through the Triangular Trade Financed the Building of Faneuil Hall,” has been characterized, denounced, and misunderstood by many people and organizations. I would like to set the record straight.

This work came out of Boston AIR, the city’s artist-in-residence program. “In the program,” describes the city’s website, “artists, community members, and City employees work on projects that help reframe social conversations. These artists explore the ways they can use art and media to improve and bolster City initiatives. They also search for ways to make artistic social practice a part of government and community work.”

As a result of this public engagement, I proposed an artwork to honor the actual and metaphorical space my ancestors occupied when they were brought here during the colonial period by Faneuil and men like him. No one asked, commissioned, or hired me to do this. I did it because in the terms of the residency, we were charged to look at the city through the lenses of resilience, and racial equity. As I stood in front of Faneuil Hall, I realized that at some point, a black person, far from home would have been standing shackled in that marketplace, or on Long Wharf, or in a private home, or in one of the many sites in New England where slave trading took place, not knowing what was being said, but knowing that these people had control over their body. That struck me then and it strikes me now as obscene.

If we are going to talk about racial equity in Boston and in this country, we need to be clear about the circumstances that have brought us to this point. We need to name the names of who did what. It is not enough to say that people were enslaved. Who enslaved them? Who turned them into products? Who kidnapped and sold them? Who worked them to death? Who was able to secure loans and mortgages based on how many people they owned? Who received compensation when enslaved people died in the Middle Passage?

If we do not name the names, then we are bound to look at enslavement as something that just “happened” as if there were no active and willing agents making it happen and benefitting from it. If we ignore the agents, then we ignore the wealth that comes from their activity.

I developed and proposed the memorial in the service of those women and men who were stolen, sold, and worked to death to create the wealth of the nation. I proposed it to alter the Faneuil Hall marketplace into a site of contemplation of an atrocity against black people. I proposed it because part of the goal of the BostonAIR program is to have contemporary artists engage with the city.

I went through the appropriate channels with the Boston Art Commission, securing the many approvals needed to begin the process of arranging public discussion of the proposed memorial. I reached out to many artists, historians, architects, educators, civil rights activists, the Freedom Trail Foundation, and curators — some of whom consented to be on the advisory board for the project. A public hearing was scheduled for July 23, and I was looking forward to beginning the larger public discussion that is necessary in the creation of a public memorial.

The origin, nature, and purpose of my work has been mis-characterized and maligned by people who have other agendas. Because of sustained misinformation linking my work to other people's campaign to rename Faneuil Hall, respected organizations — notably the Boston NAACP — developed incorrect beliefs about how this project came about. I saw my work being weaponized in order to promote the notion that the City did not care about having an engaged dialogue about race, that I was the “house negro” pawn of a white mayor, and that I was not engaged with “the community” in a public process to create the work. My repeating that none of this was true was not enough to reframe the dialogue and derailed any hope for an engaged discussion about my work as proposed.

To prevent people from claiming that my work was created and presented by a white mayor to stifle Boston's needed dialogue on race; to prevent people from claiming that my work was created in order to deflect from the issue of renaming Faneuil Hall: and to allow people to make their own arguments about their own positions without claiming that my work is an obstacle to discussion I decided that it would be best to withdraw my work.

This memorial as conceived will not happen here, but because of the attempt to have the memorial, the City of Boston agreed that the lives of the kidnapped, stolen, trafficked, and worked-to-death black people deserved to be honored in a public work. That alone gives me a tremendous amount of joy and accomplishment. It is my hope that a more talented contemporary artist will find a way to memorialize those stolen lives. I would never claim that my work or any art could stop racism, but I do believe that a site in Boston that acknowledges the open wound could become a place where we begin to heal.

That desire for healing is at the core of what I tried to do. Anyone who suggests otherwise does not know me, the project, and how hard I have worked and fought to have a 10 by 16 foot space in this city to acknowledge the trauma that originates from Faneuil Hall.

Steve Locke is an artist. A former professor at Massachusetts College of Art, he will be a professor of painting at Pratt Institute in New York this fall.