

HALLOWED GROUND and JUNETEENTH 2024

by George F. Thompson



The massive National Monument to Freedom at the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery, Alabama, upon which 122,00 surnames of the enslaved appear. Photo by George F. Thompson.

On June 6, 1944, the world as we know it today began to tilt toward freedom and democracy and away from the tyrannical, diabolical, and maniacal forces in Europe that led to the murder of more than six million Jews (and gypsies, LGBTQ, and others), the countless deaths and sufferings of civilians, and the millions of soldiers, sailors, aviators, and medical personnel who were killed and wounded in combat. On June 6, 2024, the 80th anniversary of D-Day was commemorated and watched by millions around the world. The ceremonies included veterans now in their late 90s and early 100s, most of them everyday citizens like you and me who believed in serving a cause far larger than themselves: The future of the world was at stake.

I was incredibly fortunate to have visited the beaches of Normandy and walked in the adjacent cemeteries at the age of 16. To have stood where the Germans overlooked the beaches and envision how the Allies—with great courage, fortitude, and purpose—made their way through such tortuous conditions, to walk among the neat rows of some 9,400



"Nkyinkyim" (meaning "twisted") by Kwame Akoto-Bamfo at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. The term refers to a Ghanaian proverb: "Life is a twisted journey." Photo by George F. Thompson.



The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration in downtown Montgomery, Alabama.
Photo by George F. Thompson.

white crosses and stars of David representing American dead, well, the experience was overwhelming to a privileged young lad like me.

Truly, the day spent at Normandy remains among the most impactful of my life. And so it seems with everyone who visits there. I steadfastly agree with the sentiment that every American who cares about freedom and democracy and equal justice and opportunity for all should do all they can to visit this pivotal site in world history, to walk among those who gave their lives so we could overcome fascism and genocide and live free, to contemplate what sacrifice means and how, when we walk in the footsteps of history, we must strive to make this imperfect human world a better place for all.

As we celebrate Juneteenth in our country, there is another place that every American should visit for similar historical significance, contemplation, reflection, and enlightenment: Montgomery, Alabama, where the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) has created three unforgettable sites, each different but equally haunting and meaningful. The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration and National Memorial for Peace and Justice opened in 2018, and the new 17-acre Freedom Monument Sculpture Park along the Alabama River, where tens of thousands of Africans were sold into slavery, opened on March 26, 2024, but officially is dedicated on June 19th in celebration of the new federal holiday.

My wife, sister, and I were able to visit the new sculpture park on June 7. Before long we were walking with an African-American family of five who were similarly awe-struck by what they saw. A young grandson only 18 months old was as excited as he could be as he wandered from one sculpture to another. He often held the hand of his father, a first lieutenant in the Air Force who had just completed officer training at nearby Maxwell Air Base. His mother and grandparents were also interacting with the young boy.



This noteworthy quote appears on the Legacy Museum Annex in downtown Montgomery, Alabama. This is the site of the original Legacy Museum before the new 47,000-square-foot structure opened in 2021. Photo by George F. Thompson.

At the end of the walk in the park is the massive National Monument to Freedom, upon which are engraved some 122,000 surnames of the 4.7 million people formerly enslaved as recorded in the 1870 U.S. Census. As the family posed in front of the monument for a group photo, the grandfather suddenly looked back toward the wall and pointed to a name: his family's surname. To his grandson he said: "That's our name."

Hallowed ground. Hallowed history. Hallowed memory. On Juneteenth, let us remember and learn from the errors of our past so we do not repeat them.