

Cannonsburgh Village and the Loss of African-American Voices

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Cannonsburgh Village in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, is a captivating destination that brings history to life. Through its reconstructed buildings, interactive experiences, and commitment to historical accuracy, the village offers visitors a unique opportunity to explore and appreciate the pioneer heritage of the region. However, what visitors may not realize is how African-American voices in Cannonsburgh Village in Murfreesboro, Tennessee has been a longstanding issue that has affected the representation and inclusion of African-American culture in the historical narrative of the region. This essay will explore the historical context, key figures, impact, and influential individuals who have contributed to the field of Symbolic annihilation of African-American voices in Cannonsburgh Village.

From its humble beginnings as a small farming community in the early 1800s, Cannonsburgh Village in Murfreesboro, Tennessee has grown into a thriving historic site and living history museum that offers visitors a glimpse into the past. Rich in history and culture, Cannonsburgh Village has become a popular destination for tourists and locals alike, offering a unique experience that allows visitors to step back in time and learn about the way of life in rural Tennessee in the 19th century. The historical context of the Village dates back to the early 1800s when the area was settled by pioneers seeking new opportunities and a better way of life to the 1930s.¹ The village was named after Newton Cannon, who was governor of Tennessee during the 1830s and played a significant role in the development of the area.² However, at the suggestion of William Lytle, it was renamed “Murfreesborough,” after Revolutionary War hero, Colonel Hardy Murfree.³ In 1812, it was shortened to “Murfreesboro” and officially chartered by the

¹ Throughout the critical review, I will use Cannonsburgh Village and the “Village” interchangeably to avoid repetition.

² Homer Pittard, ed. “Last Stage from Jefferson: the Development of Rutherford County.” (Rutherford County: *Griffith! a Bicentennial Publication*, 1976).

³ Henry Gannett and Geological Survey (U.S, *The Origin of Certain Place Names in the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1905), p. 218; Homer Pittard, ed. “Last Stage from Jefferson: the Development of Rutherford County.” (Rutherford County: *Griffith! a Bicentennial Publication*, 1976).

Tennessee State Legislature. The Village quickly grew into a thriving community, with farms, businesses, and homes springing up to support the growing population.

Cannonsburgh Village is a recreated historical village in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, that seeks to depict life in the area during the 19th century.⁴ The construction of Cannonsburgh Village began in 1974 as part of the American Revolution Bicentennial project.⁵ After a national competition held by the federal government, the Cannonsburgh project received a \$75,000 award for placing as one of the top 16 Bicentennial projects in the United States.⁶ Today, it is maintained and cared for by the Murfreesboro Parks and Recreation Department. The impact of Cannonsburgh Village in Murfreesboro, Tennessee has been significant, both in terms of preserving the area's rich history and culture and in providing a valuable educational resource for the community. The village has become a popular destination for tourists and locals alike, drawing visitors from near and far to experience a taste of life in rural Tennessee in the 19th to early 20th century. By providing a living history museum, Cannonsburgh Village offers a unique opportunity for visitors to learn about the early settlers and the way of life in the area during that time period. The positive aspects of Cannonsburgh Village in Murfreesboro, Tennessee are numerous, including its ability to provide an educational and immersive experience for visitors, its role in preserving and promoting the area's local history and culture, and its ability to contribute to the local economy through tourism and community engagement. The Village serves as a valuable resource for educators, students, and history enthusiasts, offering a unique opportunity to learn about the early settlers and the way of life in rural Tennessee in the 19th century. A pleasant walk through a century stretching between Cannonsburgh (Murfreesboro),

⁴ Margaret Littman, *Moon Tennessee* (Moon Travel, 2016), pp. 271–272.

⁵ “Cannonsburgh Village” (Pamphlet, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 2023), p. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

equipped with tangible and intangible reconstructions, interactive and interpretative activities for guests, highlighting local, micro-history beyond mainstream Antebellum-to-post-Reconstruction Southern macro-history. A historic site that isn't about an individual, family or town, but about *people*. The Village presents a curated version of history, highlighting the experiences and contributions of the predominantly white settlers and their descendants.

In their book, *Representation of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small explore the different ways in which southern plantation museums tell the story of enslaved peoples. The authors create a useful framework to categorize the nature of representation by these plantation museums. In their monograph of southern plantation museums, a theme they identify representing slavery and enslaved people is *Symbolic Annihilation*.⁷ Although not a typical "Southern plantation museum," Cannonsburgh Village is nevertheless important in the broader field of historical preservation and representation of marginalized people. According to Eichstedt and Small, symbolic annihilation is, "a powerful rhetorical and representational strategy for obscuring the institution of slavery," occurring when slavery is not acknowledged at all or is completely neglected from the history of the plantation museum.⁸ To understand the issue of symbolic annihilation in Cannonsburgh Village, it is essential to delve into the historical context of African-American presence in the region. Tennessee, like many southern states, has a complex history of slavery and racial segregation. African-Americans played a vital role in the development of the region, from laboring on plantations to contributing to the growth of urban areas. However, their contributions have often been marginalized and overlooked in mainstream historical narratives. The historical context of

⁷ Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2002), pp. 105–146.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 105–108.

Cannonsburgh Village and the symbolic annihilation of African-American voices can be traced back to the history of slavery and segregation in the region. Before the Civil War, Tennessee was a slave state, and the institution of slavery played a significant role in shaping the economy and social structure of the area.⁹ After the abolition of slavery, Tennessee, like many southern states, implemented segregationist policies that marginalized African-Americans and limited their access to social, economic, and political opportunities.¹⁰

Despite the significant contributions of African-Americans to the development and culture of the region, their voices and experiences have often been overlooked or marginalized in the historical narrative presented at Cannonsburgh Village. In the Village, the focus has primarily been on portraying the lives of the white residents, with little emphasis on the experiences and contributions of African-Americans. When a visitor explores Cannonsburgh Village, there is no evidence of enslaved people who contributed to the agrarian economic of frontiers Murfreesboro; there is no recognition of the post-emancipated or post-reconstructionist African-Americans. There is evidence of slavery in Murfreesboro within the village's period of 1830-1930, despite lack of documentation. Audrey Creel, an honoree student from Middle Tennessee State University, conducted a thesis study of enslaved people at the Oaklands Mansion, which owned enslaved people. In her dissertation thesis, "within a year of the start of Murfreesboro's stint as the capital, Middle Tennessee's economy was already too closely tied to the institution of slavery for the economy to efficiently function without the practice [...]" Despite the large concentration of slaves in the region, only about forty-five percent of the free male population in Middle Tennessee owned slaves. Although slightly less than half of the population owned slaves, the

⁹ Audrey Smedley and Brian D Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2012), p. 202.

¹⁰ David R. Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), p. 17, 59.

economy was intrinsically tied to its practice.”¹¹ The economic prosperity of the region was built on the backs of enslaved labor, as plantations and farms relied on the coerced work of enslaved people to produce valuable agricultural commodities.¹² This system of exploitation enriched the slaveholding class and contributed to the accumulation of wealth in the region. This lack of representation perpetuates the erasure of an entire demographic from the historical narrative, reinforcing the marginalization of African-American voices in the region. This symbolic annihilation has perpetuated a distorted representation of the past and has reinforced the exclusion of African-American perspectives from the public consciousness, especially in Murfreesboro with a population that is 17.8% African-American.¹³

The impact of the symbolic annihilation of African-American voices in Cannonsburgh Village is multifaceted. From a cultural standpoint, the omission of African-American experiences perpetuates a limited and distorted understanding of the region’s history.¹⁴ This can lead to a lack of empathy and understanding among visitors, as well as contribute to the erasure of the struggles and achievements of African-Americans. The symbolic annihilation of African-American voices in Cannonsburgh Village has far-reaching implications for the community and the broader public. It perpetuates a distorted and incomplete understanding of local history, excluding the stories and struggles of African-Americans from the narrative. This erasure not only diminishes the historical accuracy of the village but also perpetuates systemic inequalities and biases. Moreover, the symbolic annihilation of African-American voices in Cannonsburgh Village has broader social and political implications. It perpetuates a narrative that reinforces

¹¹ Audrey Creel, “The Untold Stories of the Maney Family Slaves: A Case Study of Slavery in Murfreesboro,” 2019, https://www.oaklandsmansion.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CREEL_Audrey_Fall19ThesisFinal.pdf, p. 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, “Race and Hispanic Origin, April 1, 2020 (V2022) — Murfreesboro City, Tennessee,” [www.census.gov](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/4751560) (QuickFacts, 2020), <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/4751560>.

¹⁴ Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2002), pp. 32–33.

racial hierarchies and diminishes the agency and humanity of African-Americans.¹⁵ This can have a detrimental effect on the self-esteem and identity of African-American visitors, who may feel excluded and invalidated by the historical representation presented at the Village. Moreover, the symbolic annihilation of African-American voices in Cannonsburgh Village has a profound impact on visitors, particularly young people.¹⁶ When students and tourists visit the Village, they are exposed to a version of history that does not reflect the diversity and complexity of the region's past. This perpetuates a limited and biased understanding of the contributions and experiences of African-Americans, perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing dominant narratives of white supremacy.¹⁷

From a critical perspective, the symbolic annihilation of African-American voices in Cannonsburgh Village can be understood as a manifestation of broader patterns of erasure and marginalization within historical narratives. By excluding African-American experiences and contributions from the Village's interpretation of history, the Cannonsburgh reinforces power imbalances and perpetuates a biased and selective understanding of the past.¹⁸ Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge the potential future developments related to addressing symbolic annihilation in Cannonsburgh Village. As awareness of the issue grows, there is an opportunity for the Village to engage in meaningful dialogue with the community, scholars, and descendants

¹⁵ Audrey Creel, "The Untold Stories of the Maney Family Slaves: A Case Study of Slavery in Murfreesboro," 2019, https://www.oaklandsmansion.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CREEL_Audrey_Fall19ThesisFinal.pdf, p. 14; Audrey Smedley and Brian D Smedley, *Race in North America : Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2012), pp. 105–106, 295; Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2002), p. 28, 32–33.

¹⁶ Murfreesboro Parks & Recreation, "Cannonsburgh Village | Murfreesboro, TN - Official Website," www.murfreesborotn.gov (City of Murfreesboro), accessed December 2, 2023, <https://www.murfreesborotn.gov/164/Cannonsburgh-Village>; in particular, there are school-sponsored trips to Cannonsburgh Village. On their official website, Cannonsburgh Village offers guided tours for school field trips.

¹⁷ Audrey Smedley and Brian D Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2012), pp. 243–245.

¹⁸ Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2002), pp. 5–8, 32–36, 105–108, 161–165, 169.

to create a more inclusive and accurate representation of history. This may involve revising exhibits, incorporating new educational programs, and amplifying the voices of African-American descendants and community members in shaping the Cannonsburgh Village's interpretation of the past.

Several influential individuals have contributed to the field of understanding marginalized voices of African-American and enslaved peoples' voices in historical sites and public spaces. One such figure is Patricia A. Banks, a scholar, sociologist and activist who has been vocal in advocating for the inclusion of African-American history, culture and perspectives in public spaces. Patricia Banks has conducted extensive research on the history of African-Americans and has used her expertise to raise awareness about black history and culture in public spaces. Another influential figure is Jennifer L. Eichstedt, a historian and writer who has advocated for the recognition and inclusion of enslaved people's history in public historical sites and lack of thereof. Dr. Eichstedt has written extensively on the various representation of slavery in southern plantation museums and has worked to challenge the erasure of their voices from public narratives. The work of these influential individuals has spurred important conversations about the need for a more inclusive and accurate representation of African-American history in Cannonsburgh Village and similar historical sites. Their efforts have also inspired grassroots movements and public initiatives aimed at addressing the symbolic annihilation of African-American voices in the region.

However, there are also individuals who have perpetuated the symbolic annihilation of African-American voices in Cannonsburgh Village. Some members of the local historical society and governing bodies are hesitant to acknowledging the full scope of African-American history in the region, often citing the limited historical records or conflicting interpretations of the past.

This resistance has hindered efforts to address the symbolic annihilation of African-American voices in Cannonsburgh Village and has perpetuated a whitewashed version of history. Efforts should be made to ensure that the historical narrative of Cannonsburgh Village includes the stories, experiences, and contributions of African-Americans. This can be achieved through comprehensive research, collaboration with local historians, community engagement, and the inclusion of diverse perspectives in the interpretation and presentation of historical information. Furthermore, it is crucial to foster an inclusive environment where African-American voices are not only heard but also valued and respected. This can be achieved by promoting diversity and representation in decision-making processes, encouraging dialogue and open discussions, and actively seeking out and amplifying African-American voices within the village.

The symbolic annihilation of African-American voices in Cannonsburgh Village in Murfreesboro, Tennessee has had a significant impact on the representation of African-American and enslaved people's history and culture in Middle Tennessee. While influential individuals like Dr. Patricia A. Banks and Dr. Jennifer L. Eichstedt have worked tirelessly to address this issue, resistance to change from certain factions has hindered progress. Moving forward, it is crucial for the historical community in Murfreesboro to prioritize inclusivity and accuracy in its representation of African-American and enslaved people's history, and to work collaboratively with descendants, community members and scholars to achieve a more comprehensive and equitable portrayal of the region's past. By doing so, Cannonsburgh Village has the potential to become a space that celebrates the diversity and richness of African-American contributions to the history and culture of Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

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