



*Summary Report*

# International Coalition of Sites of Conscience Summit

## Discussing Bristol's "hard history" Telling Bristol's Story

Held on February 1, 2021 via ZOOM



How does a town like Bristol, with its difficult links to slavery and the taking of American Indian tribal homelands, tell the story of its past? Bristol was designated a UNESCO Site of Memory, being one of 175 ports to remember the 2 million Africans who were lost during the passage and the over 10 million who endured the passage and lived a life of enslavement. The history of Bristol includes the history of the Pokanoket and Narragansett Tribes of Rhode Island and Southeastern Massachusetts. A complete narrative of that history enhances our understanding of the heritage of Bristol.

## Meeting Summary



On February 1, 2021, Friends of Historic Bristol, a local 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, held a Summit that brought together leaders from the Pokanoket Tribe and Descendant Voices in Action (descendants of Bristol's enslaved Africans) with Bristol Town Administration, Bristol Town Councilors, heads of Bristol nonprofits who interpret history, church leaders from multiple faiths, arts organizations and local historians to discuss Bristol's "hard history" related to its treatment of enslaved African people and American Indian peoples. More than 40 individuals attended.

"Friends of Historic Bristol Sites of Conscience Summit," was led by Braden Paynter, Director of Methodology and Practice at the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, a nonprofit network of more than 300 historic sites across the globe that work to build a more just society. Sites of Conscience helps communities, historic sites and universities deal with "hard histories." Catherine Zipf, of Bristol Historical and Preservation Society began the program with a short history of Bristol's past.

Mr. Paynter was introduced by Benjamin Bergenholtz, who stated "It is widely recognized today that Bristol had a major involvement in the slave trade that benefited most of the town, which is displayed in its wealth of historic houses and institutions." Paynter described the goal of the Summit as "working between Past and Present to shape the Future," and "telling stories on a landscape of power to move toward justice."

"We decided to hold this year's program on this topic to bring the community together to discuss our 'hard history,'" said Bergenholtz. This is the beginning of formalized discussions on how to honor the history of the lands of the Pokanoket Tribe, the leadership of the tribal groups that make up the modern-day Wampanoag Nation and the Narragansett Indian Nation, and to memorialize and honor Africans who perished during the Middle Passage as well as those who survived and endured a lifetime of slavery.

Participants were asked to consider what we can do now that will serve as a beginning to greater efforts. Much of the discussion during the Summit centered on how Bristol can commemorate this history and be more welcoming and inclusive of the American Indian and African American histories related to our town. Bristol sits on the ancestral land of the Pokanoket Tribe, and Bristol has also been named as one of 175 international UNESCO Sites of Memory including sites in Europe, Africa, the West Indies and North and South America where people can stop to remember the 2 million Africans who were lost during the Middle Passage and the over 10 million who endured the passage and lived a lifetime of enslavement.

FHB considers this Summit to be the start of an inclusive process that could have multiple outcomes: creating material products that memorialize Bristol's history, creating processes

that support respectful communication and community practices that celebrate our inclusive history, and creating relationships that strengthen the foundations of a more just society.

Those organizations who attended include representatives of: the Pokanoket Tribe; Descendant Voices in Action representing descendants of Bristol’s enslaved Africans; Town Councilor Mary Parella; Director of Community Development Diane Williamson; Bristol Historical and Preservation Society; Linden Place; Mount Hope Farm; Blithewold; Arts in Common; Bristol Art Museum; Rogers Free Library; First Congregational Church; First Baptist Church of Bristol; Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Catholic Church; St. Mary’s Catholic Church; Bristol Middle Passage Port Marker Project group; East Bay BIPOC Research Group; and the Committee for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

This initiative is part of FHB’s annual program to implement its mission to enhance the quality of life and advance the vitality derived from Bristol’s cultural, historical and architectural heritage through initiatives and local educational programs.



## **Introductory Remarks**

by Benjamin Bergenholtz, Chair, Friends of Historic Bristol

The concept for this Summit came about because of a number of conversations concerning a Middle Passage Marker Project in Bristol from various groups over the last few years. It became apparent early on and through discussions with Friends of Historic Bristol Board of Directors that this should be the telling, with considerable thought, of the African American story and that of the Pokanoket Tribe, the American Indian peoples who resided on the Bristol peninsula before the arrival of Europeans. This was not something that should be simply put up as an historic marker without significant community engagement.

This raised a number of questions, specifically how best to tell this history. Over a number of discussions at the board level, Friends of Historic Bristol voted unanimously to engage and compensate for the services of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience—an organization that specializes in addressing “hard history” within communities internationally.

It is Friends of Historic Bristol’s hope that this Summit marks the beginning of conversations which will lead to an inclusive approach to how best to commemorate Bristol’s “hard history” heritage. We wish to extend a special welcome to Descendant Voices in Action, representing African American descendants of Bristol’s enslaved Africans, and to Tracy Dancing Star Brown and Bill Winds of Thunder Guy of the Pokanoket Tribe.



## **Bristol's History**

by Catherine Zipf, Executive Director, Bristol Historical & Preservation Society

In the past, Bristol was involved in the enslavement of other humans in multiple ways.

The first was the removal and enslavement of Native peoples. As the center of the Pokanoket nation, the lands that Bristol occupies were not previously settled by Europeans. Removing and enslaving the native peoples living on what would become Bristol literally cleared the way for the town's existence.

The second was the enslavement of African peoples. Over the course of the 18th and early 19th century, Bristol's economy flourished through its citizens' participation in the African slave trade. The money that flowed into Bristol from that trade was used to construct most of the major monuments that still stand today.

The third was the enslavement of South American peoples. During the late 19th century, the production of rubber products constituted a major part of Bristol's economy--Bristol was home to at least 11 businesses that produced rubber projects, in addition to the National India Rubber Company and the US Rubber Company. The raw materials for rubber production came from South America, where native peoples were enslaved in their production.

The story of slavery in Bristol is extraordinarily complicated. Some of the money that flowed into the town from the African slave trade and from the production of rubber was used for social services and to construct buildings of benefit to the town, such as schools. This makes it difficult to cast those involved in the slave trade as either villains or heroes--they were both. This is part of the difficulty in telling this story--it is what makes it "hard history".

A second challenge is that while there were enslaved people living in Bristol who suffered considerable hardships, the vast majority of those enslaved by those who lived in Bristol lived well away from the town's environs--in Cuba, the West Indies, Charleston, and South America. This challenges our understanding of how slavery impacted the town's growth over time.

Research into these issues is ongoing and it is expected that our understanding of Bristol's complex history with slavery will evolve. The Bristol Historical & Preservation Society welcomes all those interested in pursuing this goal.



## Sites of Conscience Discussion

led by Braden Paynter, Director of Methodology and Practice at the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience

In a discussion focused on how best to tell the complex story of Bristol's history regarding enslaved Africans and the taking of the homeland and enslavement of the Pokanoket Tribe, the Wampanoag Nation and the Narragansett Indian Nation, Paynter encapsulated the task in terms of:

- Telling stories on a landscape of power
- Working between Past and Present to shape the Future
- An exercise in trying to imagine a better future
- Refusing to cede space to the assailant
- Reclaiming a space of negativity and turning it positive

Participants were then broken into small groups to discuss the question of "How were you taught as a child regarding how to right a past wrong?" In reporting out their small group discussions to the larger group, several told similar stories of having to redress a wrong as a child by going to the person who was wronged, telling the truth about the wrong they had committed, asking forgiveness, and discussing ways that they could work to make things better. Another participant mentioned the concurrent human tendency to want to say that they had personally done nothing wrong and did not have an obligation to work to "make things right."

Paynter then addressed the entire group in describing various methods of seeking justice in a North American context:

1. Through **retributive/punitive justice**: achieved through punishment. As one has been hurt by another, so justice is achieved by hurting the offender in return as a means of deterring future injustice.
2. Through **restorative justice**: by seeking to repair the harm through cooperative means, leading to the transformation of people, of relationships, and of the larger community. Here the focus is on accountability in an effort to undue the harm.

3. Through **transitional justice**: applied in cases of mass injustice, this form of justice-seeking is based on accountability and redress for victims.

What are we actually trying to do regarding increasing justice?

- **Truth-telling**
- **Accountability**
- **Memorialization**
- **Reparations**
- **Institutional Reform**

What can we do now that will serve as a beginning to greater efforts? Some outcomes that are possible for projects like Bristol's current initiative to memorialize its history with enslavement of both Africans and American Indian peoples could include:

- **Material products**
- **Creating processes to use in follow-on projects**
- **Building relationships**

More information about these options can be found on the website of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. Each is discussed briefly, below.

**Outcomes that involve Material Products** broaden the definition of what is a "memorial." Paynter provided examples beyond typical "historic markers" including such installations as:

- "Last address" plaques of people who had been "disappeared" into Russian gulags; installed on house facades if the property owners agreed.
- In an effort to continue to claim history for creativity, one project staged plays of history, pausing at various points to ask the audience "what should happen next?" Another "stage-based" memorial is Ford's Theatre in Washington DC, site of Lincoln's assassination.
- The Network for the Disappeared used hand-embroidered quilts to tell the narratives of those who had been disappeared by the Nepalese power structure. It is one of several projects using smaller scale handcrafts as memorials.
- The National AIDS Memorial Grove, a lovingly landscaped grove of shade, light and joy which encapsulates a narrative and provides a site where individuals can memorialize and share their experiences of loved ones who have died of AIDS.
- Body Mapping, in Sri Lanka, used graphics of the body as the foundation of story telling regarding the many harms that people have experienced.
- The Whitney Plantation, outside of New Orleans, is an historic museum site that tells a narrative of enslavement.
- Public muraling, such as the Arch Street Meeting House and the Pauli Murray Project.

- The Villa Grimaldi, memorializing the atrocities of the Pinochet regime in Chile, uses art to create personal remembrances of those killed.
- The Shingwauk Residential School Center
- The Hart Island Project, a memorialization at the public burial grounds in New York City.
- The Salem, MA Benches monument
- A resource for material product memorials is the National Survey / Audit of Monuments by the Monuments Lab, Mellon University; confer Elizabeth Alexander.

**Outcomes that involve Process Impact** could include such steps as:

- Making ground rules for caring and respectful communication between participants who may not share the same beliefs or perspectives.
- Creating rituals, such as an annual memorial march, which focus on new, contemporary justice concerns, staying responsive and flexible.

In another small group breakout discussion, participants considered “What processes can we change in Bristol?” One group looked at the proposed Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee which, whether functioning as an independent community group or as a part of Town government, would institutionalize the on-going consideration, dialogue and advocacy for a more just and inclusive set of community rules and actions.

**Outcomes that involve Relationship Impact** are the most important and longer-lasting strategies for bringing about justice. Impacts that are based on relationship building could include:

- A project such as creating memorials to lost family members that relies on all participants coming together to demand justice because all participants have first connected around this effort.
- Joining in any project that advocates for justice.
- The White Earth Band Ojibwe project.

Paynter asked the participants of the Summit “What relationships need to be strengthened in this community to move forward with the Middle Passage Port Marker project? The answer: relationships between the White community and African Americans and Indigenous peoples.

One participant remarked that “We should not have White people interpreting the stories for African Americans and Indigenous peoples.”



## **In conclusion:**

Paynter stated that relationships have the power to bring about change. He also spoke of the power of dynamic memorials (as opposed to static “Man on a horse”-type statues) which are powerful when they express relationships and keep powering change and having impact.

“We have to keep feeding those relationships,” Paynter said.





**Friends of Historic Bristol  
International Coalition of  
Sites of Conscience Summit  
Organizations that were invited**

Arts in Common  
Blithewold  
Bristol Art Museum  
Bristol Committee on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion  
Bristol Historical and Preservation Society  
Bristol Middle Passage and Port Marker Project  
Bristol Warren Education Foundation  
Brown University, Office of the Curator  
Coggeshall Farm  
Descendant Voices in Action  
East Bay BIPOC Research Group  
Explore Bristol  
First Baptist Church  
First Congregational Church in Bristol  
Friends of Historic Bristol  
Friends of Linden Place  
Friends of Rogers Free Library  
Linden Place  
Mount Hope Farm Trust  
Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church  
Rogers Williams University, Office of Community Engagement  
St. Elizabeth's Church  
St. Mary's Church  
St. Michael's Episcopal Church  
Town of Bristol Council, Office of Economic Development, and  
Administration  
United Brothers Synagogue



## Friends of Historic Bristol International Coalition of Sites of Conscience Summit Evaluation Survey Results

1. 100% of participants who completed the survey found the Summit to have been Very Helpful (60%) or Quite Helpful (40%) in starting Bristol's conversation about its "hard history."
2. 100% found the quality of the presentation to have been Excellent (50%) or Very Good (50%).
3. Reasons for evaluating the Summit so highly included the following remarks:
  - Program emphasized the need to gather all voices and reach consensus.
  - Even though it was short, I felt that we were all able to see the real work that needs to be done.
  - Explanation about the different kinds of justice, process to go through.
  - The expertise of the Sites leader to illustrate successful, imaginative projects and the inclusive breakout session format.
  - The presenter provided a perspective that I wasn't fully aware of; the meeting was professional yet personally engaging. Breakout rooms allowed us to connect with others; so important in this age of ZOOM.
  - I think this was a great first step in understanding what we should think about when considering honoring this history.
  - I appreciated the overview of the types of projects we might pursue to move this work forward, but mostly the chance for us all to come together. There seems to be many groups, people, and organizations doing this work in different ways, and we need more opportunities to talk, think, and learn together. This was a good start, but just a beginning.
  - Experience of speaker, practical experiences.
  - The presentation made me think differently about creating an historic monument.
4. What participants identified as the most powerful ideas presented in the Summit:
  - That "hard history" can become a communal asset if it is handled sensitively. That the stories of Africans and American Indians should not be told by Whites.
  - The idea that all of the voices in a community need to be heard and each voice respected and given its own space.
  - The power of human creativity to express outrage of unspeakable atrocities against our fellow human beings in a subtle, nonviolent manner.
  - The concept of Transitional Justice.

- The examples of different ways in which communities have honored this history.
- The push for us to broaden our definition of memorialization, but most especially the conversation about process impact, what processes we want to create, and how we might enter in them with continuous improvement in mind.
- We can create a tourist attraction/event with more appeal and greater impact than a monument, statue or plaque.

5. 60% of participants who completed the survey reported having been in touch with other individuals or organizations that participated in the Summit. 40% reported that they had not been in touch with other Summit participants.

6. Additional individuals or organizations suggested for inclusion in subsequent Sites of Conscience Summit gatherings included:

- United Brothers Synagogue (included in initial invitation)
- Coggeshall Farm Museum
- Bristol Warren Regional School District
- Herreshoff Museum

7. 100% of participants who completed the survey said they would be interested in participating in a follow-up meeting to explore Bristol's "hard history."

8. Other comments included:

Create a map of Bristol with a sequence of notable sites which tourists, residents, or students can follow to learn about historic events and stories that unfold during the walk. This will be the Bristol History Route. The Boston Freedom Trail is an example. The Route can include art installations which evoke the history as well as sites where history took place. Plan the overview of the story to be told. Identify the sites in Bristol which would be stops on The History Route. Future expansion provides continuing events to keep the History Route a living attraction.

25% response rate