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The St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Monument

Prepared by
Brian R. Owens

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Brian R. Owens

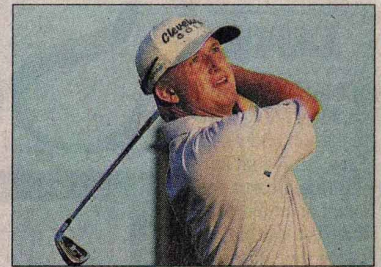
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THE ST. AUGUSTINE RECORD

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SUNDAY MAY 15, 2011

StAugustine.com

City unveils Foot Soldiers monument

Crowd celebrates work of local civil rights crusaders

By **JUSTINE GRIFFIN**
justine.griffin@staugustine.com

Freedom Rider Hank Thomas remembers thinking he was going to die on a bus that was fire bombed by a mob in Alabama 50 years ago.

Thomas, one of the original Freedom Riders and a St. Augustine native, recounted the details of his civil rights protesting days as a young adult in the 1960s at the unveiling of the St. Augustine Foot Soldiers monument in the Plaza de la Constitucion on Saturday evening.

"Today is the anniversary of that bus burning," Thomas said to a group of hundreds that gathered under the Old Market pavilion in downtown St. Augustine. "I thought I was going to die at 19 years old."

Freedom Riders traveled through Southern cities by bus to fight for the right of African-Americans to travel across state lines on trains and buses while using the same seats, bathrooms, water fountains and other facilities as whites.

Thomas and several others were trapped inside a bus while a mob fire bombed the bus and held the doors closed.

PLEASE SEE **MONUMENT/3A**



From left, Barbara Vickers, Cathy Brown, George Gardner and Nena Vreeland react during the unveiling of the Foot Soldiers monument in the Plaza de la Constitucion on Saturday. By **DARON DEAN**, daron.dean@staugustine.com



Mayor Joe Boles shakes hands with Barbara Vickers, center, after the unveiling ceremony for the Foot Soldiers monument in the Plaza de La Constitution on Saturday afternoon. **By DARON DEAN**, daron.dean@staugustine.com

MONUMENT

CONTINUED FROM 1A

That event in May 1961 is one of many violent acts Thomas saw or was apart of as a protester.

Civil rights protesters like Thomas and Dr. Robert Hayling, who alongside Martin Luther King Jr., played a major role in helping young African-Americans rally against segregation in St. Augustine, spoke at the unveiling ceremony.

Longtime Lincolnville resident, 88-year-old Barbara Vickers sparked an interest in 2004 of creating a

memorial for civil rights activists in St. Augustine. A board of directors was formed, which included Cathy Brown, the executive director at the Council on Aging, and former city of St. Augustine mayor George Gardner. From that, the St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Remembrance Project was born.

City and county officials, among many others, watched as Vickers and others pulled down a black sheet the hung over the new bronze sculpture in the Plaza. Four head busts represent the many Foot Soldiers who were arrested, threatened and just fought for equal rights in St. Augustine.

Carolyn Fisher led the

audience, packed tightly under the cover of the market to keep out of the rain, in song. Together they sang "the Freedom Song," "This little light of Mine," and many others.

Ms. Carrie Johnson, known as the "Voice of Lincolnville," led the group in song as she rode up to the Plaza on her well-known purple tricycle, her straw hat with a purple sash tucked underneath a bright yellow raincoat.

"In the words of Errol Jones, 'Let the healing continue,'" said St. Augustine Mayor Joe Boles.

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Postcard from St. Augustine: The St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Monument

by *Brian R. Owens*



— St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Monument. Bronze sculpture by Brian R. Owens of Deltona.

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In May a bronze monument was unveiled in St. Augustine in remembrance of ordinary citizens who engaged in various forms of peaceful protest to advance the cause of civil rights there in 1963 and 1964. This was a critical period for the civil rights movement that had been unfolding in many states for nearly a decade. The citizens who marched in St. Augustine, who survived a staggering level of violence, are credited with helping to sustain the political pressure needed to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Historian David Nolan describes it as “the most important event in St. Augustine’s modern history.” They called themselves Foot Soldiers.



— Detail of monument.

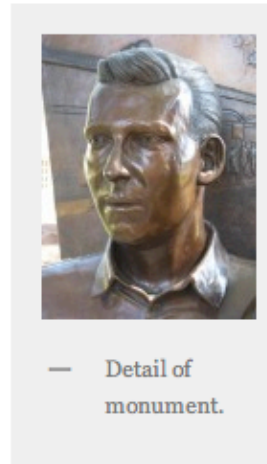
I sculpted the monument for a non-profit, tax-exempt organization founded by Barbara H. Vickers, herself a Foot Soldier. Her mission: to create a monument to honor anonymous citizen-heroes connected to events that were largely unknown outside of her city; install it on the most prominent, historic property; get it done in a time when raising private funds is a challenge, when we are at risk of forgetting our own history and perhaps, of forgetting that there is nothing that can't be done.

Vickers surrounded herself with people who knew the inner workings of city government and how to organize a project like this. The St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Remembrance Project, Inc. was driven by a small core of people but powered by over 200 individuals and 20 companies that contributed to the project. The monument is permanently installed in the Plaza de la Constitucion, a public park in downtown St. Augustine, near the corner of King and Charlotte Streets, 40 feet from a historic structure that was once used to sell slaves. The City contributed landscaping, concrete and engineering services and is now the owner of the monument. Not all public art projects can be handled this way, but this is a method worth noting.



Follow

Just after the installation, I stood around while the adhesive that connects the plaque to the stone base hardened. Two men walked up – one white and one black – seeing the monument for the first time. They were in a loud, enthusiastic discussion of how to rethink tourism, of new ways to include the monument in advertisements, of the monument as a symbol of our human ability to find creative solutions when the institutions that should protect us fail us. Neither of them was alive in 1964 and still, they connected with the art. They were so excited – so physically animated – that I had to step forward to keep one of them from accidentally knocking the plaque clean off.



Now that the epoch of the civil rights movement is over, we may see it from another angle – as those two men did. It was after all, a human achievement. I suspect that, for them, black and white is a kind of TV they don't make anymore. Green is the color that preoccupied us at the moment and it's not the green of the natural world. St. Augustine is a city that is dependent now, as it was in 1964, on tourism. I have no crystal ball to gauge how the monument affects their economy, but I do know how much lighter my own wallet is now that my lady-friend has rediscovered the place. Shortly after the monument was featured on the statewide public radio program "Florida Frontiers," I received a happy message from the producer with feedback. Apparently, lots of people were planning a little weekend getaway to the "oldest city in north America." And if the metrics of my website are to be believed, then many of the people who visit my site – and it's a big number – get a gentle invitation to visit St. Augustine as well.

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This entry was posted in [Postcards](#) and tagged [Barbara Vickers](#), [Brian Owens](#), [City of St. Augustine](#), [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#), [Florida](#), [florida division of cultural affairs](#), [Foot Soldiers](#), [St. Augustine](#), [St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Monument](#) by [culturebuildsfloida](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).



7 THOUGHTS ON "POSTCARD FROM ST. AUGUSTINE: THE ST. AUGUSTINE FOOT SOLDIERS MONUMENT"



Matthew J. Meachem, Jr. on **December 17, 2011 at 5:11 am** said:
Excellent work. Barbara is Cousin to the Meachem family, not only are we proud of her contribution. But the effort of sustaining our history.

Reply ↓



brianrowens on **December 24, 2011 at 6:52 pm** said:
Thanks Matthew. Florida Frontiers archived their public radio interview with Barbara Vickers. You can listen to it online by going to their web site at <http://myfloridahistory.org/frontiers/shows> and playing episode 095. They did a good job.


Reply ↓

Pingback: [A Day in the Life: Brian Owens | culturebuildsfloida](#)



brianrowens on **January 20, 2012 at 1:14 am** said:
You may be entertained to visit a slideshow of this project on Flickr at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/69075395@N08/show/>
A lot of people teamed-up to help complete the physical work: Foundry-men, stone fabricators, city engineers, the installation crew and my rigging expert/driver, for example. No one even came close to breaking a sweat on the installation day. Enjoy the show.

Reply ↓

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Douglas & Jennifer Highsmith on **January 23, 2012 at 2:33 pm** said:

Barbara is the neice of Catherine Meachem Perez (ninety-eight years old, soon to be ninety-nine 02/10/2011). Our Family is so proud of all of Barbara's accomplishments, she is not only a contributor to our history but she is an inspiration to our family. We love her dearly! We encourage her to keep up her good work in working with others and embracing all to bring about the realities of life. Our thanks and appreciation to all who worked so hard to bring about dream of something that once was just a vision in the mind of man and is now such a heartfelt and beautiful monument for our eyes to behold. Sincerely Douglas and Jennifer (Perez) Highsmith, cousins of Barbara Vickers.

Reply ↓



brianrowens

on **January 23, 2012 at 4:48 pm** said:

Yes, indeed and thank you for commenting. Please tell your friends and associates about this article.

Reply ↓



brianrowens

on **January 23, 2012 at 4:56 pm** said:

There is also an article posted on Wikipedia that includes a more detailed account of how the project was organized and executed. This might be interesting to people who were thinking about using this project as a sort of "model" for their own monument. See

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Augustine_Foot_Soldiers_Monument

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St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Monument

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Monument is located near the corner of King St. and Charlotte St. in the Southeast corner of the Plaza De La Constitucion (known as "the Plaza"), an historic public park in downtown **St. Augustine, Florida**. It is in remembrance of the people who engaged in various forms of peaceful protest in **St. Augustine in the early sixties** to advance the cause of civil rights, contributing to the passage of the **Civil Rights Act of 1964**. The monument, commissioned by the St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Remembrance Project, Inc. (the "Project"), was installed and unveiled in May, 2011.^{[1][2]}



St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Monument, by Brian R. Owens

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Physical Description [\[edit\]](#)

The 675 LB bronze monument designed by sculptor Brian R. Owens of Deltona, Florida - features four life-size portraits of anonymous foot soldiers placed shoulder to shoulder, in front of a relief illustrating a protest in the same Plaza where the monument is now installed. The portraits represent an approximate demographic profile of the foot soldiers: A Caucasian college student, and three African Americans: A male in his thirties, a female in her sixties and a 16 year old female. The 7500 LB tapered cast-stone base - designed by Enzo Torcoletti of St. Augustine - includes **Coquina**, a naturally occurring material used in the construction of many historic structures in St. Augustine. An historic plaque is displayed on the front of the base and a donor-recognition plaque is on the back.^[3]

History of the Installation Site [\[edit\]](#)

The Project - a non-profit tax-exempt organization separate from government - desired to install a monument in the Plaza, which is owned by the City. The location was considered ideal for a number of reasons: The Plaza - originally built on orders from the king of Spain in 1598 - features a number of historic items and structures, including a Confederate Monument and a "Slave Market".^{[4][5]} The Slave Market - an open, roofed structure that was once used as public market pavillion where property was sold, including slaves - is located in the Northeast corner. There are still some who believe that it was named the Slave Market in order to promote it as a tourist attraction in the early 20th century and that slaves were never actually sold there,^[6] but historian David Nolan discovered incontrovertible evidence in the form of multiple advertisements, deed books and City Council minutes proving that numbers of slaves were auctioned there. The evidence also proves that slaves were punished in the structure by public whipping in the 1840s. David Nolan concluded this research in the 1980s at the request of a City Commissioner.^[7] The Plaza is also a place where history was made. The first attempts to integrate food counters in St. Augustine were at a



[Woolworths](#) that faced the Plaza. Later, Foot Soldiers made numerous "night marches" to the Plaza.^[8] St. Augustine is the oldest city in the US settled by Europeans, therefore it is almost certain that the Plaza is the oldest public park in the US that still functions as a public park. The Plaza is prominent, unique in appearance and natural beauty and crossed by large numbers of tourists. Protests were held at many places in St. Augustine, but the [Woolworths](#) and Monson Motor Lodge (the privately owned places most familiar to students of history) have moved out or no longer exist.^{[9][10][11]} The Plaza however, appears much as it did in the 1960s. In April 2009, the St. Augustine City Commissioners amended a City Code that precluded the placement of monuments in the Plaza celebrating historical events occurring after February 21, 1821 so that this monument could be installed, recognizing as historian David Nolan put it - "the most important event in St. Augustine's modern history".^{[12][13]} The installation site is located near the Slave Market. The monument faces away from the Slave Market, towards King St. and the building where Woolworths was located.

History of the Project

[edit]

Barbara H. Vickers, 88 years old (as of the unveiling), a native of St. Augustine and Foot Soldier who marched in the early sixties, conceived the idea of creating a [public art](#) monument and began to organize the Project in 2005. She was motivated by a desire to recognize the protesters who were largely anonymous and unrecognized until now for the price they paid in the way of physical injuries, lost jobs and lost homes.^[14] Also, the civil rights movement in St. Augustine is largely unknown, even to students of the [American Civil Rights Movement](#). St. Augustine is only a footnote in many books on this subject, including what is arguably the most prominent historical overview in the form of a book and its companion television series: [Eyes on the Prize](#).^[15] With the help of prominent, influential citizens - some of whom had experience as politicians and knew the workings of city government - Vickers and her associates established the St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Remembrance Project, Inc. (the Project), as a tax-exempt nonprofit organization. The Board of Directors included experts in history, fine art, communications and politics.^[1] The Project identified three qualified sculptors, with the intention of selecting a sculptor prior to substantive fund-raising.

The object was to complete a monument (a bronze sculpture and base), install it in the historic Plaza De La Constitucion and then give it to the City. This required thorough and formal communication with City officials at every stage of the process, including the selection of the sculptor, presentations showing the design and the release of technical details related to durability and safety.

After producing a concept drawing and a price estimate, Brian R. Owens was awarded the commission. The Project and Owens agreed to handle the commission in three stages: First, Owens would refine the concept drawing and produce a illustrations to help support the Projects fund-raising efforts; then Owens would sculpt a full-sized clay model of the monument for the Project to approve;^[16] then Owens would proceed to complete the monument in bronze and deliver it to the Plaza for the Project to lift and install onto the base.

Owens would supply designs for the base, but the final decision on its design would be the responsibility of the Project. The Project would also fabricate and install the base. The City agreed to pay for construction needed to prepare the installation site to receive the monument. This would involve pouring new concrete in the area. Substantive fund-raising began in 2008. Over a period of about 24 months, over 220 individuals and 22 corporations donated the roughly \$70,000 needed to cover all costs.^[2] In September 2009, Brian R. Owens and the project signed a contract in a public ceremony held on site less than 40 feet from the Slave Market and Owens commenced work before all of the funds were raised.^{[17][18]} As the monument neared completion, the City finished construction needed to prepare the site, including a circular concrete walkway, sidewalks, landscaping and coquina benches.^[19] The base and sculpture were installed on the same day, covered with a lockable canvas tarp, and then unveiled a few days later on May 14, 2011. By the end of May, title to the monument transferred from the Project to the City of St. Augustine.

The Unveiling Ceremony

[edit]

The monument was unveiled after a ceremony, attended by roughly 200 people, on Saturday, May 14, 2011 in the Plaza. The upbeat and lively ceremony was held in the Slave Market due to heavy rain.^[20] The program included a number of speakers and musical performers.^[1] Financial supporters had been recognized during a separate event held at [Flagler College](#) earlier that day. Speakers included Dr. Robert B. Hayling, a native of St. Augustine and one of the leaders of the movement there. Dr. Hayling was a dentist with a practice, whose hands were deliberately broken by a segregationist mob that abducted him.^{[8][21][22]} The keynote speaker, Mr. Henry (Hank) Thomas, a native of St. Augustine, was one of the first to be arrested for attempting to be served at Woolworth's in 1961,^[23] two years before the civil rights movement commenced there in 1963. He then joined the civil rights movement in other states and is one of the few living [Freedom Riders](#).^[24] Hank Thomas' speech included an account of how his system of beliefs and faith helped him survive extraordinary acts of mob violence and attempted murder. The rain stopped when it was time for the unveiling. The monument was unveiled by Barbara H. Vickers, members of the Project and government officials of the City of St. Augustine. Live music and finger-food was provided to the public without charge at a restaurant nearby.

Gallery

[edit]



Historical Plaque



Donor Recognition Plaque

References

[edit]

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- ¹⁷ ^a Johnson, Susan (2009). "Foot Soldiers project celebrates signing" ↗. *The St. Augustine Record*
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21. [^] Duncan, Gwendolyn (2004). "Dr. Robert B. Hayling - "Father of the Civil Rights Act of 1964"". *Accord Freedom Trail*.
22. [^] Chasin, Barbara (2011). "The Freedom Struggle in St. Augustine, Florida: Recognizing the Foot Soldiers"". *MLK Community Build*.
23. [^] Bronson, Dr. (2002). "St. Augustine Civil Rights 1960 - 1965"".
24. [^] "Freedom Riders"". *PBS, American Experience*. 2011

External links

[edit]

- Photographs of the monument and how it was made, on a flickr page uploaded by Brian R. Owens in October, 2011
- Public Radio interview, EPISODE 95, broadcast statewide in Oct. and Sep. 2011
- Editorial, *Historic City News*, May 16, 2011
- *Dare Not Walk Alone*, An award-winning feature length documentary film by Jeremy Dean, released by Indican Pictures in 2007
- *If It Takes All Summer*, By Dan R. Warren, The University of Alabama Press, 2008
- *There Goes My Everything; White Southerners in The Age Of Civil Rights, 1945-1975*, By Jason Sokol, Vintage Books, 2007
- YouTube video of Henry (Hank) Thomas' speech at the monument unveiling ceremony, Part 1
- YouTube video of Henry (Hank) Thomas' speech at the monument unveiling ceremony, Part 2
- YouTube video: A short unfinished film of the unveiling with historical overview by students at Flagler College



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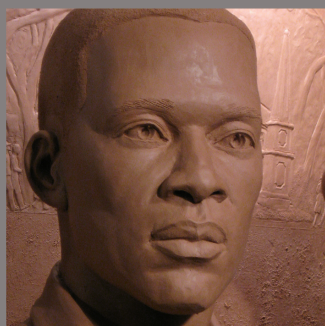
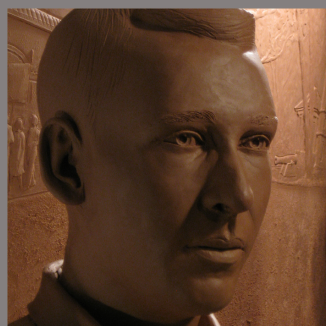
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Brian R. Owens - *Sculptor*



St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Monument

These images show the sculpture as it now exists in clay. When completed in bronze, it will be installed in the historic Plaza de la Constitucion, in downtown St. Augustine, Florida.

The St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Monument honors those who marched in St. Augustine to advance the cause of civil rights in the 1960's.

This monument was commissioned by the St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Remembrance Project, a tax-exempt non-profit organization. It is made possible through the generosity of a wide diversity of support too numerous to list here.