Remembering the Reconstruction: An Interview with Kate Masur

By Sarah Manhardt, University of Chicago

Kate Masur is an American historian interested in race and equality in the Civil War and Reconstruction periods. She is an associate professor of American history and an affiliate of the Department of African American Studies at Northwestern University. Her 2010 book, An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle for Equality in Washington, D.C. examines the history of public policy and black politics during Reconstruction. Together with Gregory Downs (University of California, Davis), she has been involved in the National Park Service's interpretation of the Reconstruction era, helping to create Reconstruction: The Official National Park Service Handbook and to write a National Historic Landmark Theme Study on Reconstruction. The Park Service's new focus on Reconstruction resulted, in part, in the establishment of the nation's first National Monument dedicated to the history of Reconstruction, which President Obama created under the 1907 Antiquities Act on January 20th, 2017.

This interview was conducted by Sarah Manhardt at the University of Chicago.

Chicago Journal of History **(CJH):** To start, could you talk about what has drawn you to becoming a historian and what the practice of history means to you?

Kate Masur (KM): Unlike most people who are history professors, I do not have a Ph.D. in history—mine is in American Studies. I always wanted to understand the United States better, but when I was in college I was most interested in cultural studies and critical theory. The history department where I was an undergraduate was not friendly to interdisciplinary approaches; it was very old school, especially among the Americanist historians. So although I was interested in history and how it can help us understand the present, I did not think I would ever fit into the discipline of history because of the institution where I happened to be.

In fact, when I decided to apply to graduate schools I didn't apply to any history departments. Luckily I didn't get into any of the more literary graduate programs that I applied to, but I did get accepted to University of Michigan's American Culture program, and that was where I found out that the practice of American history can be very creative, open-ended, and heterogeneous.

I like the eclectic methodologies permitted by the field of history. History research and writing can encompass many different kinds of questions and many different points of view, and I like that quite a bit. I continue to be motivated in part by a desire to understand the world we live in now. We can't fully understand things like poverty or foreign policy or presidential elections if we don't also go back to ascertain how we got here.

CJH: More specifically to your work, your book is about the black community in Washington, D.C., and I was wondering what interested you in that topic?

KM: I got interested in the Reconstruction period when I was in graduate school, thinking about a lot of different questions in American history and, in particular, questions about race and inequality and social movements. I was also interested in this very fundamental question of why, after slavery ended during the American Civil War, it wasn't possible to bring into existence the relatively democratic and egalitarian world that so many people already envisioned at that time. Why didn't it happen? That big and old question really drew me to Reconstruction.

I ended up studying Washington D.C. in part because, although I'm from Chicago, I had grown going to Washington somewhat frequently to visit a relative. I had always seen Washington as a place where real people lived, not just as place where you might go on your eighth-grade fieldtrip when you visit monuments like the Capitol and the White House. I saw it as a city where people lived and worked, a place of significance for African American history and urban history.

I guessed that Washington would be an interesting place to study Reconstruction because of its special relationship to the federal government and because it was of its regional location in the Upper South. I thought, wouldn't it stand to reason that in a moment of dramatic experimentation in federal policy, Congress would partly be experimenting on the District of Columbia? Also, isn't it interesting that the capital is kind of Northern and kind

of Southern? Slavery was legal until 1862, but at the same time, during the Civil War and Reconstruction many Northerners were there.

CJH: I've thought of Washington in terms of the monumental city and the residential city. I was wondering from your research what were some of the most interesting things you've found about the residential part of the city in the Reconstruction period?

KM: There were tons of interesting things. I also wouldn't draw such a sharp distinction between the monumental city and the residential city. One thing I was really interested in, for example, were the everyday people who worked in those monuments.

You can't have a Capitol building and a White House and a Treasury building without tons and tons of people who work there every day, who go home to their houses in Washington D.C. or the surrounding area. Many tourists see only the glistening and pristine monuments, but those landmarks may be part of everyday life and work if you live in Washington.

I was particularly interested in all the people, but especially the African Americans, who worked for the federal government during the Civil War and Reconstruction. That was a period in which African Americans increasingly were able to get jobs with the government, at first in menial labor jobs, but later (starting in about 1869) in white-collar jobs.

CJH: Could you also speak about the idea, as we often say, that winners write history, but for such a long period of time, a lot of the history of the Civil War and of Reconstruction has been told from a Southern perspective? Do you think that's true and why or why not?

KM: I don't think that's strictly true. I think the perspective on the Civil War and Reconstruction that emerged as the mainstream view may have originated in the South, but it was quickly adopted by white Americans across regional lines. As David Blight and others have written, part of the way the United Sates came back together after the Civil War was by generating a broad-based consensus about what the war and Reconstruction had meant. That consensus tended to diminish the significance of slavery in causing the war and the significance of abolition as an outcome; to exclude the service of African American men as U.S. soldiers during the war; and also to narrate Reconstruction as a story of unfair federal domination and "Negro misrule" over white South. That consensus about the meanings of the Civil War and Reconstruction was generally accepted in universities, in the film industry, and in popular and literary culture.

CJH: Are there lasting misunderstandings about Reconstruction and if so, what role do they play in American society today?

KM: I think there are two main strands in popular misunderstanding of Reconstruction. One is that a lot of people simply don't know anything at all about Reconstruction. They don't have a wrong idea—they just have no idea. I also think some of the old, Jim Crow story of Reconstruction is still around, even though people aren't necessarily aware that's what it is when they're articulating it. I recently gave two examples of that phenomenon in my class on the Civil War and Reconstruction.

One is a scene in Stephen Spielberg's 2012 movie, *Lincoln*. Most of the movie is not about Reconstruction, it's about Lincoln. However, there are a few scenes that preview Reconstruction. In one of them, Lincoln and Thaddeus Stevens are talking in the basement of the White House, and Lincoln says in measured tones that Congress will have to work with him to pass the 13th Amendment. Stevens, by contrast, calls for a total revolution and redistribution of property in the South. When Lincoln tells Stevens that Stevens's own constituents won't support that, Stevens says, "I shit on the people." He says he doesn't care what his constituents think and implies that he has no respect for them. Lincoln is represented as pragmatic and reasonable, and Stevens is represented as essentially undemocratic and un-American: he doesn't care about his constituents, he's very autocratic and not interested in popular governance. I think the scene exemplifies the continuing ripple effects of a vision of the Radical Republicans as horrible, arrogant, tyrannical people who were driven by visions of revenge on the white South. That interpretation, of course, runs contrary to what scholars since the 1960s have found in their research.

The film *Lincoln* suggests that if Lincoln had lived, everything would have been different. Hillary Clinton last spring said something very similar. She was asked to name her favorite American president, and she named Abraham Lincoln. She said he was a great president and then she said something like, "I think if he had lived, white southerners would not have felt so disrespected and the country would now be a lot less divided." Here the idea is that Lincoln would have somehow magically persuaded everyone to get along, and the challenges of Reconstruction would have been avoided.

The kinds of narratives about Reconstruction that are repeated in the film and that Hillary Clinton repeated are really sunk very deeply into our culture. I think part of the problem is that even if people are ready to disavow an overtly racist version of that history, a compelling new *public* story of Reconstruction has not necessarily emerged to

replace the old one, even though historians have long since overturned the early 20th-century "Dunning School."

CJH: To shift into your work with the National Park Service (NPS), can you start with why you think that is a good vehicle to tell history?

KM: The NPS not only oversees natural landmarks like the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone National Park, but a huge number of historic sites visited by millions of people each year. Surveys show that the NPS is widely trusted and respected among Americans. The Park Service manages more than 70 sites related to the Civil War, so it has been in the business of interpreting that era for a long time. Because of its reach, because of its connection to the Civil War, and because its mandate is to interpret and preserve American history for the American people and visitors from abroad, it seems very appropriate that the Park Service recognize the significance of Reconstruction. Yet it hasn't until now.

CJH: What first spurred that movement to create a national monument for Reconstruction or to start interpreting Reconstruction?

KM: The conversation about the NPS's lack of a Reconstruction site began long before I was involved. I can't necessarily pinpoint the origin of that conversation, but certainly by the end of the Clinton administration around the year 2000, there was a conversation going on within the Park Service and among some university-based historians, particularly Eric Foner, about creating an NPS site dedicated to interpreting Reconstruction. At that time, people were talking about a National Monument or National Park in Beaufort, South Carolina. That effort, which got to the point of legislation introduced in Congress, ended up failing for political reasons.

I came in with my collaborator, historian Gregory Downs (University of California, Davis) around 2013, in the middle of the sesquicentennial commemoration of the Civil War. As a result of the sesquicentennial, there were a lot of fun and interesting opportunities to speak publicly about the history of the American Civil War and its meaning in the present.

At that time, Greg and I and some other historians who work on Reconstruction talked about how when we arrived at spring 2015—the 150th anniversary of things like Lee's surrender at Appomattox—the commemorations would suddenly cease. We knew that 150 years ago, the action had certainly not ended; in some ways it had barely begun. Yet Reconstruction has totally different valences in American culture and memory from the Civil War. We would sort of joke about how predictable it was that no one would commemorate Reconstruction. But then we decided to try to make an effort of our own.

We asked ourselves, "What can we do to get people talking about Reconstruction and the upcoming anniversaries of things like the passage of the 13th Amendment or the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 or the ratification of the 14th and 15th Amendments?" We wondered if the NPS had any plans to revive its Reconstruction project. Eventually, with the help of Jim Grossman, executive director of the American Historical Association, we met with Robert Sutton, who was then the chief historian of the NPS, and we learned that people at NPS were already talking among themselves about this question, and so from there we became involved.

CJH: What did that collaboration between historians and the Park Service look like? What did you get out of it?

KM: One thing that became clear was that we historians who teach in colleges and universities, and people in the Park Service—whether they are historians or people with other titles—have a lot to offer each other and a lot in common, but we aren't always able to connect with each other. To somebody like me in a university, the Park Service might seem like an impenetrable organization. If I wanted to offer my services or explore whether I could collaborate with a local site, who could I talk to or how could I be useful?

On the other side, many times people in the Park Service are working incredibly hard (it's a perpetually underfunded agency), and although they might like to collaborate with a professor or with a classroom of students, they don't necessary know whom to turn to in a university. I think it would be great to have more collaboration between people working in the NPS and people working in colleges and universities, and two questions on my mind have been, how do we make sure this happens and what are the barriers to collaboration?

CJH: That leads into the next question, what is the significance of the Beaufort site?

KM: Many things make the Beaufort area extraordinarily significant for the Reconstruction era. It was one of the first places in the Confederacy that was occupied by U.S. forces, and so it was one of the first places where wholesale emancipation began. When the northerners arrived, most plantation owners in the area fled inland and most of the slaves—left behind or refusing to accompany their owners—became tacitly if not officially free. They began to work for wages. Northern missionaries soon came and established schools, and freedpeople developed their own

independent communities and churches. Meanwhile a man named Robert Smalls, a skilled slave from Charleston, commandeered a Confederate ship and sailed it into Union lines, becoming a war hero of national renown. He later returned to the coastal South Carolina and entered a long career in Republican politics. He ended up serving in the state legislature and in the United States House of Representatives and remained in politics into the 1890s. Smalls' career was unusual for its duration, but in many ways, he represents the emergence of African Americans in local and national politics in that period. The Beaufort area was a stronghold for black politics even after Democrats retook control of the state government—often through violent means—in 1876-77.

Another thing to keep in mind is that the Beaufort area has a lot of well-preserved buildings. When designating a national historic landmark or a national monument, you usually have to have relatively intact buildings that are located on their original sites. So, Beaufort emerged as the top site both because of the significance of what happened there and because of the integrity of its buildings.

CJH: Can you talk about what the site looks like physically and what you expect to see in the monument?

KM: The monument designation includes four different sites: Brick Baptist Church; Darrah Hall at the Penn Center; the site of Camp Saxton, a military camp where the Emancipation Proclamation was read on January 1st, 1863; and an old firehouse in the town of Beaufort. People in NPS and in the Beaufort area are currently in the process of envisioning how these sites will work together, and there are plans to develop Reconstruction walking tours of the town or to use the sites as jumping-off points for exploring Reconstruction history in other parts of the region and the state. However it shapes up, the monument will be a place where the NPS interprets the history of Reconstruction for the general public.

CJH: How did you feel when President Obama created the monument after all your work to build that up?

KM: It felt amazing and gratifying. It was also surprising, because it came together quite quickly at the very end of Obama's administration. I personally was not sure whether all of the paperwork would be finished in time. I also wasn't sure whether President Obama would sign it. He was doing a lot of things in his last several days in office, and we didn't know whether this would be something he considered important or whether it would even be brought to his attention.

It was particularly gratifying that he announced this monument—together with two monuments to the 20th-century Civil Rights Movement—in honor of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. It felt so appropriate to view the Reconstruction monument as part of a long history of civil rights struggles in the United States and to connect it to the memory of Dr. King.

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