

A Reflection on the Nat Fuller Feast, April 19th, 2015



The commemoration of the Nat Fuller Feast held this past April was a once-in-a-lifetime event. I'm still humbled that I was invited to sit and break bread with the other guests. Because I am a descendant of Eliza Seymour Lee (she was my great-great-grandmother), who played an integral part in Nat Fuller's training, the evening was especially enchanting.

For me, what Nat did after the war is unprecedented. He decided to hold a huge feast in celebration—but not just to celebrate the end of the war, but to celebrate what the end of the war would mean—slaves, free blacks, and whites now had the opportunity to live their lives equally and together.

As a child growing up in Charleston, South Carolina, I always remembered my mother talking about our relative Eliza Lee and the inn that she ran on Broad Street. In the 1960s and 1970s there was a Piggly Wiggly grocery store on Broad Street. My mother always said it was originally the site of the Lee Hotel (or Mansion House Hotel). As a six-year-old, knowing that my ancestor had a famous hotel 100-plus years earlier on that very spot made me feel quite proud! Even before I knew this story, I had already been bitten by the hospitality (industry) bug. At the age of three or four, my favorite TV show was Julia Child's "The French Chef." (In retrospect, this seems interesting since I now know that Eliza was French-trained in the culinary arts.) While most kids would ask for candy or soda from the grocery store, I would ask for smoked oysters and stuffed olives so I could cook and create my masterpieces. Once I'd received these ingredients, I would pull up a dining room chair to the kitchen counter and make my little versions of assorted "hors d'oeuvres." The only guidelines given by my mother were not to lick the knife, and not to put anything back on the plate if it had been dropped. Surely, I was channeling my great-great-grandmother, even back then!



1. Dinner service at the Charleston reconciliation banquet. Photo by Jonathan Boncek. Courtesy of the Nat Fuller Committee.

I must confess that I had never heard about Nat Fuller, or his feast, before last year. But of course Eliza Lee would have had apprentices; it makes sense that she would have needed very skilled help to run her catering business, bakery, inns, and restaurant. I'm still not clear if she had more than one protégé. I wonder if there were others, equally talented, whose stories still remain unknown. After receiving the invitation to the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Nat Fuller Feast, I wanted to learn everything I could about him. Nat Fuller's vision amazes me. When anyone refers to someone thinking "light years ahead of themselves," he should always be referenced. I mean, we're talking about a cook who was a slave until the mayor of the city turned it over to a Union Army general. I wonder how Nat would have felt if he

had known that, almost 100 years later, a man named Martin Luther King Jr. would be trying to do what he had actually succeeded in doing: creating a moment when former slaves and former slaveowners sat [“down together at the table of brotherhood.”](#)

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The question that I reflect on the most? How did he come up with his list of guests for that evening? We know that he invited his former white clients, the most significant people in the African American community (members of the Brown Society, etc.), and some prominent officials in the occupying government to be his guests at his famous restaurant, the Bachelor’s Retreat. But did he carefully comb through a list of possible attendees to come up with the perfect list? Though I think people may think that, I want to believe the list was created with less discretion. I’ve been in the hospitality industry for most of my life, a career that’s included formal training at Johnson & Wales University. Feeling that I have the same passion about food and caring for others as Nat Fuller had makes me feel confident that he was trying to focus on expressing his gratefulness for the new ways of life to come. I also believe he wanted to share his gratitude with people that he felt would not only understand, but also be comfortable with the thought of reconciliation, and appreciate his joy. I do feel that he gave some thought to the targeted groups that he wanted to invite. How excited he must have been knowing that he would have a former slave, a free white person, and an official from the Union Army all sitting together eating and having a conversation. To have been a fly on the wall ...



2. Desserts about to be served at the reconciliation banquet. Photo by Jonathan Boncek. Courtesy of the Nat Fuller Committee.

I want to thank Professor Shields for the many hours it took to put the April 19, 2015, Nat Fuller Feast together. He truly recreated the occasion for social unity that Nat Fuller wanted to achieve. Of all of the comments and conversations that evening at the table, among the most memorable was several guests noting that they had lived in Charleston all their lives, and had never seen these attendees—from all walks of life, different social groups, etc.—all at the same dinner table. They said if it ever happened again, it would be at the next Nat Fuller Feast dinner. Now, after the horrible events of June 17, it might seem as if reconciliation is still too far off. But in spite of tragedy and strife, Charlestonians continue to lay down their differences and work together ... today, as well as 150 years ago.

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