

The Nat Fuller Feast: Together, in Harmony



Clinton, South Carolina, seems at first blush an unlikely host location for the Nat Fuller Feast.

One couldn't call it a "one-stoplight town"—there are, in fact, four. But its size—at roughly 8,500 souls, it's around one-one hundredth the size of the three other host locations—would seem to militate against its selection, along with its complete lack of a fine dining tradition. Not only did the last "white tablecloth" restaurant vanish six or seven years ago, its owners' plans reduced to so much rubble by the financial crash of 2008, but indeed much of the town qualifies under the USDA's definition of a food desert: a "low-income area with limited access to healthy, affordable food."



1. The plaque dedicated to the "colored friends" buried in the cemetery from 1855-1869. Photo courtesy of the author.

So what was it, then, that motivated Clinton to respond to Dr. David Shields' call for a new Civil War commemoration tradition? And not just to respond, but for every significant institution in the town—from the president and senior administration of Presbyterian College to the city government to the churches to the leading employers, philanthropists, and citizens on both sides of the color line—to embrace the ideas behind the dinner and participate in its planning and eventual success?

There were many reasons, and three of them are inscribed into the town's physical landscape. They include:

*A towering obelisk, at the crossroads in the center of town. Seen by every passerby, the Confederate Heroes memorial is such an everyday sight that few register it. Dedicated in 1910, and rising as high as the roof of the nearby train depot, it shouts its message, "lest we forget"—in a town whose population is nearly forty percent African American.

*Another marker that "everyone" knows about but few will speak of. Half covered by sand and weeds at the farthest corner of the First Presbyterian Church cemetery, it's about the size of a composition notebook: a dark-colored stone that bears a haunting inscription:

"In Memory Of

Our Colored Friends
Who Were Buried Here
1855–1869”

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*And finally, those earlier referenced train tracks, which for decades served to segregate the textile “mill town” north of the line from the wealth, prestige, and prosperity of the town’s founders, who lived to the south. It’s a division that lingers. With the demise of the mills and the failure to find any source of employment to replace them, the old mill town has become a center of desperate poverty, with a population that is 90 percent highly transient renters who live a forty-minute walk—in a town lacking public transportation or even a taxi service—from the nearest full-service grocery.

Clinton is small. Clinton is poor. Clinton is divided. And at the same time, Clinton desperately desires to heal its divisions, to solve its problems. As our committee of city and college officials, representatives of the African American community and the powerful churches—both black and white—met, shared stories, and developed trust and a common language for discussing the difficult issues raised by the initiative, it became clear that we were drawn together by a shared conviction that Nat Fuller’s story, which at heart is a story about the power of hospitality, had the potential to be transformative for our tiny town.



2. The grave of the founder of Presbyterian College, William Plumer Jacobs, is in the same cemetery, but in a somewhat, shall we say, more prominent place than the “colored friends” plaque. Jacobs was a Presbyterian minister who was the pastor of First Presbyterian and the founder of Thornwell Orphanage (established for Civil War orphans) and Presbyterian College (so the orphans would have a place for higher education). Photo courtesy of the author.

As Frank Stovall, the Clinton city manager, was to say again and again over the course of our work together, in words that electrified and informed our sense of mission every time he uttered them: “Ferguson, Missouri, has to be our wake-up call. There’s not a small-town city manager in America who doesn’t realize that ‘that could be my town.’ But if I have anything to say about it, it’ll never be this small town.”

Of course, there were many moments that underlined the enormity of the task ahead of us. One of them came about halfway through the planning process, when a steering committee member shared the story behind one of the names on the

guest list. The gentleman in question—who did not wish to be recognized or singled out in any way—was the nephew of “the last man lynched in Laurens County.” The date of that crime, 1937, was recent enough to send a chill down our collective spines. I myself was deeply shaken by the realization that our small town harbored living descendants on both sides of this horrific crime—and they likely were well aware of the tangled and tragic relationship. What, it made me wonder, were we doing? What were we hoping that a mere dinner could accomplish in the face of such concentrated historical evil? And more to the point: how should I, as chairman of the committee and leader of this effort, respond to this information?

I answered that question not as an academic but as a Southerner. I asked for a meeting with the Rev. Dr. Blake Harwell, for 17 years the pastor of First Baptist Church and a member of our committee. I asked him to pray—for the committee, for the community, for the work that we were trying to do, that it might prosper and that we might bring healing to our outwardly placid and charming but deeply hurt and hurting town. And what ensued was truly remarkable, for not only did Harwell pray, he went much further than that, rallying a group of ministers representing every important congregation in town to pray as well, for the Nat Fuller Feast and for the wider Clinton community. Virtually every week during Lent, this group met, knowing full well that most of them would not be invited. And yet they gathered—and prayed.

And so it was that Clinton’s Nat Fuller Feast was held on April 9, the sesquicentennial of the day that the Battle of Appomattox Courthouse was fought and lost, and “Marse Bob” Lee surrendered what remained of the Army of Northern Virginia to Gen. (and soon to be president) Ulysses S. Grant. Their actions on that day changed the course of American history. With a few strokes of a pen, a new and completely different vista unfurled, a view of a world without slavery. And while so many of us have been taught to view that day as a day of unconditional sadness, the feast served to highlight the fact that the truth is far more complex. Because it was also a day of liberation—yes, for the enslaved but also for those who had enslaved them. And all across the South, there was mourning, but there was also relief, sheer, simple relief, that the war had ended. There was hope, because the human animal is nothing if not optimistic. And there was even, everywhere, celebration. Because the day of Jubilee had come and a people once enslaved was free.



3. The memorial to Confederate Heroes at the main crossroads of town was erected 1910 by the Daughters of the Confederacy. Photo courtesy of the author.

This sesquicentennial year also should remind us that there have been three fifty-year anniversaries of the war and, at each of those anniversaries, the nation has effectively renegotiated its meaning. The first, in the immediate aftermath of the experience, was about the veterans, about honoring their sacrifices and celebrating their valor. It was also, unfortunately, about historical erasure, as North and South, in agreeing to a story that they could

tell themselves about the war, agreed that the experiences of black veterans, the triumph of emancipation, and the postwar era's successful experiments in integrated governing and living would simply be written out of the historical record.

The most potent symbol of this process is a centennial anniversary that almost no one is celebrating—the anniversary of the release of “Birth of a Nation,” which revived a moribund Ku Klux Klan and unleashed a wave of violence and hatred across the nation. Given this backdrop, it was probably not surprising that the second semicentennial of the war was about the unfinished business of the first. In 1965, the word “Selma” became branded on the nation's consciousness, with the year's tumultuous events bookended by the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

In Clinton, we greeted the third semicentennial of the Civil War against the backdrop of a summer and fall of protests, the [#blacklivesmatter](#) movement, and, only days before our event, charges of murder against a North Charleston policeman in the apparent execution of a fleeing African American man. Once again, April 9 saw us asking ourselves, what did those 150-year-old events mean? What do they have to do with today? And especially, what meaning should they carry for our children, our students, their faces so full of hope and possibility?

In this sesquicentennial year, it is critical that we confront the question of how we give our youth the tools to confront change and to live in this new century. This, of course, involves understanding the past: knowing it, but knowing all of it, not just the parts that are pleasurable or conformable to our most flattering ancestral portraits; and honoring it, the parts that were, indeed, honorable. It's traditional to quote Faulkner when talking about the South and the past. But for the purposes of conversation on racial reconciliation, Robert Penn Warren is much more to the point. As he wrote so memorably in one of my favorite novels, *All the King's Men*, “If you could not accept the past and its burden there was no future, for without one there cannot be the other.”

You'll note that Warren does not merely reference the past; he speaks of the past and its burden. Here, I hope I may be forgiven if I reference a piece of my personal journey. I'm a new faculty member at Presbyterian College and very new to the Clinton area. But I'm also a native of the South—and I'm part of that roughly one third of the nation with a direct connection to the Civil War. I have relations who fought in the war—on the Confederate side—and I have relations who were freed by the war.

My family's history proper begins during Reconstruction, when that white slaveholder who was also my two-times great-grandfather gave his sons money, instead of the land they were unable to inherit, and they used that money to purchase land in Greenwood County. I'm one of the heirs to that 150 acres, in Ninety Six, South Carolina—land purchased “when peace declare,” as the old

people refer to Emancipation—that is still intact and in the family.

I've had the experience of standing beside a great uncle on a remnant of the "Charleston Road," which once stretched from "Indian Country" in South Carolina's northwest corner to the coast. We were on the outskirts of Saluda, South Carolina, and he was showing me the foundation stones of the plantation where my ancestors were enslaved. Then he pointed out the approximate location of his grandfather's cabin, and began repeating those tales his Pawpaw told him, of learning what freedom was and that he was free, and then of watching the soldiers as they walked slowly home after their hard-fought war.

What is the future that can be made out of this past?

At Clinton's Nat Fuller Feast, I observed as the initial unease of the whites in the room—adjusting to the presence of so many African American guests—relaxed into warmth and amity as people sampled the wine and hors d'oeuvres and conversed. I watched the intent faces of the crowd as speaker after speaker rose to offer their sense of the occasion. I watched the city manager as he described seeing the news feed from Ferguson while attending a convention in Atlanta, and being overcome with horror as he watched a city's compact with the public, the compact to offer order and safety, simply shatter. I watched as the Rev. Harwell delivered a preview of his first post-Easter sermon: a hard-hitting description of a horrific event in Clinton's Reconstruction-era history, an assault on the black community that left twelve African Americans dead, and I watched his fearless and uncompromising challenge to the white community, to begin living the words of their faith. As these men spoke, and the table conversations unfolded, I watched as a town I barely knew was moved and laughed and prayed—"together, in harmony," just like the motto our committee had hopefully adopted. And I saw a future beginning to sprout, like a green leaf struggling to cast off the casing of a seed.

In a moment of doubt in our planning process, I had asked myself, what can a mere dinner accomplish in the face of concentrated historical evil? That evening I had my answer: a great deal indeed.

At our feast, the town's leading philanthropists, George and Ann Cornelson, and the president of the university, Dr. Claude Lilly, sat down to dinner with an African American city councilwoman and a couple of "church ladies" from Friendship A.M.E. Church. They had so much fun that Mrs. Cornelson buttonholed me before the evening ended to share her ideas for next year's event. At a nearby table, the leader of the local #blacklivesmatter movement, the Rev. Steven L. Evans, brainstormed with Clinton's police chief, Robin Morse, on how to recruit more African Americans to the force. The report on the conversation came from Harold Nichols, head coach of the Presbyterian College football team, whose praise of his tablemates, and of the event, was effusive. "I've never attended anything like this in my life," he said as he pumped my hand. "Please call on me in the future. I want to be involved in whatever comes

next.”

Dr. Shields, in issuing his call for participation in the Nat Fuller initiative, emphasized the way in which Fuller’s gesture, in “reasserting the antebellum ethic of hospitality, in invoking a spirit of generosity,” created a space for black and white citizens to come together. One hundred and fifty years later, our experience in a small town with a tragic past demonstrates that such gestures resonate still—that they can, in fact, be transformative.

The Nat Fuller Feast allowed Clintonians, black and white, to reconcile the stories that they tell about the past. Operating from a common understanding, we can now begin the process of reaching out and effecting the kinds of changes that can suture the tears in our community’s fabric.

“Together, in harmony.”

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