

Historic images of slavery removed by national parks after Trump directive

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The Trump administration has compelled national parks—including Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, Manassas National Battlefield Park, Independence National Historical Park, and the President’s House Site in Philadelphia—to remove photographs, signs, and exhibit panels detailing the history of slavery and Native American displacement.

The removals, which have come to light in recent days, came in response to a March 27 Executive Order that called for censoring history deemed by the Trump administration to promote “corrosive ideology,” directing the National Park Service to eliminate materials considered to “unfairly disparage Americans.” Parks and museums nationwide were instructed to review and remove interpretive content on slavery, Indigenous dispossession, and related subjects that the administration judged presented the nation’s past “in a negative light.”

Staff at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park—where abolitionist John Brown led an unsuccessful attempt at starting a slave revolt in 1859—flagged over 30 pieces of material on display that were potentially in violation of Trump’s diktat.

At Manassas National Battlefield Park in Virginia—where the First and Second Battle of Bull Run took place in July 1861 and August 1862 respectively—staff were ordered by the Trump administration to remove a plaque which criticizes the pseudohistorical “lost-cause” myth propagated by ex-Confederate leaders.

At Sitka National Historical Park in Alaska and Florida’s Castillo de San Marcos National Monument, the Trump administration is investigating displays which mention the forced relocation and mistreatment of Native Americans.

But the most notable example of this sweeping

removal effort is the famous photograph known as “The Scourged Back,” taken in 1863 during the Civil War, and showing Peter (sometimes called Gordon), who had escaped a Louisiana plantation and reached Union lines after a harrowing flight of about eighty miles. The image, taken at a Union military camp by photographers McPherson & Oliver, shows Peter’s back gruesomely scarred from years of whipping—a visual testament to the violence of slavery.

The “Scourged Back” photograph was first published as a wood engraving in Harper’s Weekly on July 4, 1863, Independence Day—the same day news broke of the Union’s victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, connecting the struggle for emancipation with national preservation. Abolitionists called for the photograph to be “multiplied by the hundred thousand and scattered over the states,” arguing it could do for public opinion what Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin had achieved in fiction. The photograph helped strengthen support for Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, which had been issued January 1 that year.

The action to pull this and other images dealing with slavery from display at places like Fort Pulaski and Independence National Historical Park has been met with outrage from historians and museum professionals.

As Columbia University’s Dr. Stephanie McCurry stated, “These are not just documents—they are witnesses.” Bowdoin College’s Anne Cross, who studies Civil War photography, notes that images like Peter’s “altered political opinions about the need to defeat the Confederacy and preserve the Union.” Historian David Blight remarked, “Slavery is not an addendum to American history—it is central to it. When we remove the faces of the enslaved from our national story, we risk leaving visitors with a history that is not

only incomplete, but dishonest.”

The removals have been condemned by the National Parks Conservation Association, whose director Alan Spears declared, “Great countries don’t hide from their history. The decision to remove this photograph from our national parks is as shameful as it is wrong.” Former park interpreter James Parker stressed the irreplaceable pedagogical importance of the removed photographs. “Without them, whole generations are denied the direct, visceral facts of the past,” he said.

There can no longer be any doubt that the Trump administration is attempting to stamp out the history of slavery in the US and to rehabilitate the Confederate States of America, which seceded in 1861 in a bid to preserve chattel slavery in perpetuity.

Trump’s moves against the National Park Service slavery photography follow on the heels of an aggressive campaign launched against the Smithsonian Institution, where President Trump has accused the museum complex of promoting “anti-American ideology” for its honest exhibitions about slavery and American racism.

In an executive tweet and subsequent order posted on August 19, Trump condemned the Smithsonian for emphasizing “how horrible our Country is, how bad Slavery was,” and directed his attorneys to audit the museum’s exhibitions and begin purging content he considered divisive or insufficiently patriotic. The White House has threatened to revoke vital federal funding unless the Smithsonian and other cultural organizations reshape their narratives to “showcase a more positive portrayal of the nation”—an ultimatum that risks layoffs, closures, and the privatization of priceless public collections.

In recent months, Trump has reversed the removal of Confederate symbols from US military bases, restoring the original names of installations such as Fort Bragg, Fort Hood, and Fort Benning—returning honorifics to Confederate commanders who fought to preserve slavery. Paintings and monuments celebrating the Confederacy, including the reinstallation of Robert E. Lee’s portrait at West Point have been publicly justified as honoring “our history.”

Since 2021, dozens of states—such as Florida, Texas, Arkansas, and Tennessee—have enacted laws that limit classroom discussion of slavery, racism, and other forms of exploitation.

In Florida, new education standards require students to be taught that enslaved people “developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit,” a provision widely condemned by historians as grossly distorting historical reality. Teachers report facing a “minefield” of vague and punitive restrictions, with some states establishing hotlines or offering bounties for reporting suspected violations.

With the planned celebration of America’s semiquincentennial in 2026, the Trump administration has set its sights on “improving” the infrastructure and displays at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia, setting July 4 as a deadline for purging materials deemed “disparaging.”

Trump’s crusade to whitewash American history mirrors his administration’s attacks on art and science. It is a regime that depends for its existence on the construction of a false reality in the past as much as the present.

But facts, as the old saying goes, are stubborn things—in the past as well as the present. The brutality of human bondage was a truth so powerful as to have once moved a whole generation into Civil War—a social revolution that ended chattel slavery and destroyed the southern oligarchy built on it. This remains a memory etched deeply in the democratic, egalitarian consciousness of the American working class. And it is a memory that Trump and the billionaire oligarchy he represents dreads.



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